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THESIS

**VEILED “BOMBSHELLS”: WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION
IN ISLAMIST EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS**

by

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June 2017

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EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS**

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ABSTRACT

Many assume any woman who serves as a terrorist combatant or suicide bomber does so at the behest of a male-dominated hierarchy and not of her own volition. However, this overarching notion appears contradictory given the historical participation of women within liberation movements, uprisings, and terrorism. Faced with what seems to be a growing trend within violent extremist organizations, states, militaries, policy-makers, and academics are confronted with a vital question: Are women purely serving as baby factories for future terrorists, as sex slaves, as logistical support, and as sacrificial lambs; or, do they have a more active, combatant role? In examining the evolving roles of women within Islamist extremist organizations, this thesis concludes that women are not merely innocent bystanders coopted and coerced by male-dominated patriarchal Islamist organizations. Women are increasingly seeking more combatant and more public roles in these organizations and, in so doing, constitute a legitimate threat that must be engaged. Through a review of the prevailing literature concerning women's participation in violence and analysis of the Islamic Resistance Movement, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State, this thesis highlights the crucial and evolving roles that women play within violent Islamist organizations. The author concludes that the more nationalistic an organization becomes, the greater the role women tend to have within it. As such, should organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State establish a nationalist objective, vice their current global jihadist agenda, female participation within these organizations may further evolve beyond purely militant roles and into the realm of politics and leadership. By highlighting the fact that men do not possess a monopoly on violence, the author informs policy-makers and planners of the risks involved in discounting the agency of female participants within these organizations.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AQ	al-Qaeda
AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
HAMAS	Islamic Resistance Movement
IEO	Islamist extremist organization
ISIS	Islamic State
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MP	Member of Parliament
PA	Palestinian Authority
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
VEO	violent extremist organization

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

I have learned that a woman can be a fighter, a freedom fighter, a political activist, and that she can fall in love, and be loved, she can be married, have children, be a mother.

—Leila Khaled¹

Women have consistently participated within a myriad array of political, militant, and extremist activities, despite the primarily male, patriarchal structure of society that has dominated throughout modern history. Such participation spans the gamut from peaceful demonstrations and boycotts to front-line combat and suicide bombings. Furthermore, contrary to the universally espoused pre-conceived notions of a woman's inherent nature as weak, nurturing, and passive, women, like their male counterparts, frequently participate in violent acts. Their participation in violence can be in response to oppression, violence, humiliation, and occupation, as well as a means of citizenship within their societies and established states. According to Kaufman and Williams, when women serve as combatants, they challenge gender-based assumptions and expectations.² As evidence, the majority of media outlets continue to portray such women as exceptions and describe them in terms of their physical features and familial/social relations, and most within society continue to be surprised when confronted with images of female combatants.

Faced with what seems to be a growing trend within violent extremist organizations (VEO), states, security services, intelligence specialists, militaries, policy-makers, and academics are confronted with an extremely important question: Are women purely serving as baby factories for future terrorists, as sex slaves, as cooks and logistical

¹ R. Kim Cragin and Sara A. Daly, *Women as Terrorists: Mothers, Recruiters, and Martyrs* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2009), 83. Leila Khaled, a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and credited as the first woman to hijack an airplane, is one of the most infamous Palestinian terrorists

² Joyce P. Kaufman and Kristen P. Williams, *Women at War, Women Building Peace: Challenging Gender Norms* (Boulder: Kumarian Press, 2013), 1, <https://www.rienner.com/uploads/51e7fdb3e1723.pdf>.

support, and as sacrificial lambs; or, do they have a more active, combatant role in Islamist extremist organizations (IEO)? If females do have a larger role, is it one they are forced into or one of their choosing? If the role of women has evolved within these organizations, what factors have contributed to these more active/prominent/combatant roles? How will our armed forces engage potential female terrorists?

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

From a stereotypical Western viewpoint, many assume that any woman who serves as a terrorist combatant or suicide bomber does so at the behest of a male dominated world/hierarchy and not of her own volition. In fact, this notion seems to be supported by the following response received from a graduate school professor and terrorism subject matter expert regarding the legitimacy of the aforementioned research question: “It should be obvious that...most Islamists regard women as ‘second-class’ people and fighters. Hence they prefer to employ them in support roles or, sometimes, as cannon fodder to carry out suicide attacks.”³ While there seems to be some element of truth to these statements, the overarching notion appears contradictory given the historical participation of women within liberation movements, uprisings, and terrorist activities (however tangentially involved). More recently, the formation of the all-female, Islamic State (ISIS) al-Khanssaa Brigade and al-Qaeda (AQ)-affiliated Dhat al-Nitaqayn Martyrdom Brigade seems to indicate a more prominent role for women within Islamic extremism and its expansion. Most importantly, if the last point is true, what does this mean for ongoing counter-terrorism efforts?

According to the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs at the United Nations, females represented 49.558% of the world’s population in 2015.⁴ Representing nearly half of the world’s population, females serve as a significant pool from which to recruit, train, and operationalize future terrorists. Though research regarding female participation with terrorist-related organizations and in terrorist-related

³ Jeffrey Bale, email correspondence with author, 03 November 2015.

⁴ “World Population Prospects, the 2015 Revision,” Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, accessed 12 March 2016, <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/dataquery/>.

activities has exponentially increased in the new millennium, Jacques and Taylor note that the preponderance of this literature has lacked any significant contributions to both theory and policy formation.⁵ Recognizing that women serve both strategic and tactical benefits for extremist organizations, if current counter-terrorism efforts are to prove successful, there must be an increased focus on the expanding roles that women play within VEOs. No longer content to fill logistical and support roles, women have increasingly sought (and, at times, forced their way into) more active, combatant roles. Codifying the factors that contribute to and characterize female involvement in terrorism is a necessary field of research. Such information, and analysis thereof, is essential to providing a broader understanding of terrorism as well as to formulating potential initiatives focused on prevention and intervention.⁶ This sentiment is further echoed by Nacos, who espouses that gender-based research on, theoretical approaches to, and policy implementation targeted against preventing and responding to female participation within Islamic extremism is necessary for successful anti- and counter-terrorism policies.⁷

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Introduction

According to most scholars of terrorism and terrorist-related activities, the 1968 Palestinian hijacking of an Israeli El Al commercial airliner represents the advent of modern terrorism.⁸ Subsequently, in the 1970s, academia witnessed a drastic increase in literature focused on terrorism, particularly on defining terrorism and its philosophy.⁹ With increasing frequency, the 1980s and 1990s saw a shift away from defining terrorism towards a focus on analyzing terrorist organizations, their members, their motives, and their operations. Since the early 2000s, literature has abounded with studies of terrorism

⁵ Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor, "Female Terrorism: A Review," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 3 (2009): 500.

⁶ Jacques and Taylor, "Female Terrorism," 499.

⁷ Brigitte L. Nacos, "The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media: Similar Framing Patterns in the News Coverage of Women in Politics and in Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 448.

⁸ Cragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid*, 8.

and recommendations as to the means by which states, and their associated militaries and security apparatuses, can attempt to thwart acts of terrorism, the recruitment of future terrorists, and terrorist organizations. Despite the fact that women have historically participated in political violence and terrorism, cultural and gender biases, which lead most to believe that women are inherently passive and non-violent, have contributed to much of this literature being focused on the roles, motivations, and operations of men within these organizations. However, as evidenced by the increasing participation and expanding roles of women within extremist organizations, academics, security specialists, intelligence communities, and states are being forced to recognize that women are amplifying their involvement with terrorist organizations across multiple fronts.¹⁰

2. Background

Female involvement within internationally designated terrorist organizations throughout all regions of the world is not a new phenomenon. However, of increasing concern to most states and those who advise policy formation is the apparent rate at which women are seeking increased participation with and expanded roles within IEOs.¹¹ Overwhelmingly, prior to the late-twentieth century, women served in support functions within most terrorist organizations; removed from the front-lines of political violence, they served as cooks, healthcare providers, propagandists, intelligence gatherers, scouts, weapon and supply couriers, maintainers of safe-houses, and, most importantly, mothers and guarantors of the cause. A body of scholarly research illustrates that, since the 1960s, women have served in progressively more active and expansive roles within violent extremist organizations; Cragin and Daly categorize these roles as logisticians, recruiters, suicide bombers, operational leaders, and political vanguards.¹² Comparatively, these overarching roles have been described by Hearne as participants and enablers; by Fink, et

¹⁰ Karla J. Cunningham, "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26, no. 3 (2003): 172.

¹¹ Karla J. Cunningham, "Countering Female Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 2 (2007): 113.

¹² Cragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*, v.

al., as supporters and perpetrators; and by Jacques and Taylor as sympathizers, spies, warriors, and leaders.¹³

3. Motivations

According to Bloom, “women across a number of conflicts and in several different terrorist groups tend to be motivated by one or several of the four Rs [plus One]: revenge, redemption, relationship, respect, [and rape]”; these overarching trends regarding the motivations for why women engage in political violence and terrorist activity are echoed by Cunningham.¹⁴ While there is no universal profile to identify those women who choose to become involved in terrorism; both agree that women often engage in violence and join extremist organizations for personal reasons, whether due to the loss of a family member, familial and social relationships with existing extremists, economic circumstances, societal circumstances, loss of personal honor, and/or rape.¹⁵ By describing such choices as personal, this argument seems to suggest that women do not actively and consciously choose to participate in extremist organizations; but, rather, that they are exploited by the societies in which they live and the organizations which they serve.¹⁶ Such assumptions diminish the credibility and influence of women within and without these organizations, delegitimizing their motivations and removing their agency.

Through her in-depth analysis of multiple politically violent movements and VEOs, Bloom illustrates that, although coercion plays a significant role within families and societies in which religious and cultural norms as well as codes of conduct are

¹³ Ellie B. Hearne, “Participants, Enablers, and Preventers: The Roles of Women in Terrorism” (research paper presented at the British International Studies Association annual conference, Leicester, UK, December 2009), https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/jaro2010/MVZ203/Gender_Terrorism_BISA_Hearne_Dec_2009.pdf; Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Rafia Barakat, and Liat Shetret, “The Roles of Women in Terrorism, Conflict, and Violent Extremism: Lessons for the United Nations and International Actors,” Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, April 2013: 1, http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/NCF_RB_LS_policybrief_1320.pdf; and Jacques and Taylor, “Female Terrorism, 507.

¹⁴ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 235 and Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends,” 186–187.

¹⁵ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 235, 242 and Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends,” 186–187.

¹⁶ Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends,” 186.

utilized to curtail female behavior and societal participation, force is not the sole motive for all female terrorists.¹⁷ While women often willingly and actively participate in political violence and join VEOs as a conscious decision, there are numerous examples of the use of coercion in order to co-opt female participation. During the Second Chechen War, male family members reportedly sold their daughters and sisters as suicide bombers for the Chechen cause and married off their daughters to jihadis, often in return for a modest monetary payment. Rustam (Aslan), a well-known jihadi fighter, was reportedly paid \$1,500 per sister in exchange for their participation as suicide bombers in support of the Chechen cause; he is considered to have completed similar transactions using at least another half-dozen Chechen women.¹⁸ When not sold or married off, young women have been kidnapped, drugged, and raped in order to compel participation in terrorist organizations, particularly as suicide bombers. One Chechen recruit reported that, after being married off to a jihadi, she was passed amongst her husband's comrades for their sexual pleasure; upon awaking from the ordeal, she found herself amongst strangers, all of whom were being groomed for future jihadi missions.¹⁹ Similarly, with regard to female participation within the Sri-Lankan-based Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), international organizations have identified kidnapping, forced mobilization, and extortion as forms of coercive recruitment employed by leaders and experienced members within this group.²⁰ In extremely religious and culturally conservative societies, such as those found throughout the Muslim Middle East, child marriage and rape have been utilized to coerce families into providing their daughters to the al-Qaeda cause. Some male militants reportedly marry a woman only to turn around and allow her to be raped, an act that dishonors both her and her family and facilitates her recruitment as a suicide bomber.²¹ In other instances, some Iraqi communities have resorted to raping

¹⁷ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 30.

¹⁸ Ibid, 59.

¹⁹ Ibid, 60.

²⁰ Ibid, 156, 167.

²¹ Ibid, 222.

their own women as a means by which to establish the impetus for and foster participation in acts of suicide terrorism.²²

4. Women as Violent Actors

Yet history has shown time and again that women can be just as violent and savage as their male counterparts, under certain circumstances and conditions.²³ Several case studies illustrate the role that oppressive regimes, the presence of foreign occupiers, and the use of sexual humiliation and rape play in contributing to very public, ideological, motivations for supporting and joining VEOs. In fact, some scholars suggest that the motivations for joining and the means by which women are recruited and pressured into operating on behalf of terrorist organizations are often the same as men. Both women and men deliberately engage in violent acts against their perceived oppressors in response to ideological grievances and, often, both succumb to societal and familial pressures.²⁴ According to scholars who have conducted personal interviews with would-be female martyrs and analysis thereof, women are increasingly seeking and calling for expanded roles within their respective organizations. When such roles are not opened to them within established organizations, women may carry out lone-wolf attacks and take moves to develop their own, independent organizations. According to the *Associated Press*, in April 2015, at a federal court in New York, two women were charged with plotting to wage violent *jihad*. Unwilling to adopt a more subservient role and serve merely as jihadi brides overseas, these two women sought fame by planning, orchestrating, and executing a domestic attack reminiscent of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing.²⁵ Similarly, in April 2015, reporting indicated that a video had emerged from Syria of an un-named, all-female brigade that espoused a woman's role as equal to that of

²² Ibid, 223.

²³ Bloom, *Bombshell*, viiii.

²⁴ Cragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*, 15.

²⁵ Tom Hays, "Terror Cases Allege Women Wanted to Fight, Not Wed Fighters," *Associated Press*, 04 April 2015, http://www.salon.com/2015/04/04/terror_cases_allege_women_wanted_to_fight_not_wed_fighters/.

a man.²⁶ According to Charlie Winter, a researcher at the Quilliam Foundation, the group's lack of affiliation with any established jihadi groups, such as ISIS, is indicated by the absence of associated flags and stated allegiance.²⁷ More importantly, this group staunchly opposes the Islamic State's view of a woman's role, as espoused in *Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women by the al-Khanssaa Brigade*.²⁸ Furthermore, the Dhat al-Nitaqayn Martyrdom Brigade, an AQ-affiliated commando unit led by and composed exclusively of women, serves as yet another example of women taking violence into their own hands. In 2008, the group's leader "vowed to unleash her army of female martyrs on the streets of Baghdad to combat disbelief and vice."²⁹ As evidenced by these examples, it is not only naive but also inaccurate to assume that all women who participate in terrorist activities and serve as martyrs have been exploited by their societies and VEOs. For a number of women, their participation in violence is both conscious and deliberate.

5. Theoretical Approaches

a. Feminist Theory

The scholarly literature differs as to whether or not gender, and more specifically feminist ideology, plays a role in motivating women to participate in VEOs. While there is no unifying feminist ideology, there are common themes across its numerous varieties, including, but not limited to, the oppression of women, the inherent value of women and their associated experiences, and the impact of internal and external factors on female

²⁶ Heather Saul, "Mysterious Brigade of All-Female Jihadists Demanding Equality with Men Emerges in Syria: The Brigade Insists that a Woman's Role is Equal to a Man," *Independent*, 10 April 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/mysterious-brigade-of-all-female-jihadists-demanding-equality-with-men-emerges-in-syria-10167710.html>.

²⁷ Saul, "Mysterious Brigade of All-Female Jihadists," <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/mysterious-brigade-of-all-female-jihadists-demanding-equality-with-men-emerges-in-syria-10167710.html>.

²⁸ Charlie Winter, trans., *Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade*, Quilliam Foundation, February 2015, <https://therinjfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/women-of-the-islamic-state3.pdf>.

²⁹ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 217.

behavior.³⁰ Recognizing these key tenets, Flax identifies the central purpose of feminist theory as the adoption of personal political action as a means to address and challenge oppressive structures, institutions, ideologies, and behaviors.³¹ As such, feminist theory serves as one theoretical approach to analyze female participation in IEOs. According to Cragin and Daly, overwhelmingly, the women they interviewed highlighted their pursuit of feminist objectives in conjunction with the political objectives of the terrorist groups with which they were affiliated.³² This sentiment seems to be echoed by Berko, an Israeli counter-terrorism expert, who argues that Palestinian female bombers seek equality with men. During her interviews, a common theme emerged: Palestinian women strongly believed there was no inherent difference between their male counterparts and themselves in terms of a desire, willingness, and ability to defend both their land and their nationalistic ideology. Furthermore, in fighting for their rights as women, some described their effort and aptitude as commensurate with that of male participants within the *Intifada*.³³

The notion that women are seeking gender equality via participation in violent extremist organizations suggests that, “as agents of violence, women are no longer defined according to their gendered roles...Participation in terrorism is a means through which women can pursue...female liberation or emancipation.”³⁴ For example, one can argue that the significant representation of female frontline fighters and the world’s highest number of female suicide bombers within the LTTE, an organization which verbally supported gender equality in a region where women’s rights are few, illustrates the pursuit of gender equality through participation in VEOs. This is similar to the aforementioned cases from April 2015, both in the United States and Syria, which depicted female jihadis seeking equal footing with their male counterparts. While Salafist

³⁰ Kathy Lay and James G. Daley, “A Critique of Feminist Theory,” *Advances in Social Work* 8, no. 1 (2007): 51.

³¹ Lay and Daley, “A Critique of Feminist Theory,” 50.

³² Cragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*, xi.

³³ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 245–246.

³⁴ Katharina Von Knop, “The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda’s Women,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 5 (2007): 399–400.

ideology continues to dictate the private, domestic roles of women, both radical Sunni and Shi'a ideologues are increasingly recognizing the equality of men and women with respect to the requirements of *jihad*.³⁵ According to Hani al-Siba'i, a militant Islamist based in the United Kingdom, "men and women are equal in terms of their obligation (*fard*) and personal responsibility for holy war and are rewarded equally for their actions."³⁶ Furthermore, al-Siba'i suggests that the overwhelming familial relations noted within most martyrdom operations, as well as the analysis which indicates the influence of familial ties on female participation in VEOs, are a direct result of the religious and cultural limitations that restrict female freedom of movement within conservative Muslim societies.³⁷ This statement appears to verify Cunningham's analysis that public participation in violent extremist organizations corresponds with the perception that increasingly combative roles may represent a means by which to achieve social and political equality within entrenched patriarchal systems and societies.³⁸ This dualistic feminist-nationalist ideological desire is clearly illustrated by Leila Khaled, who is revered by many Palestinian freedom fighters for her role as the first female hijacker. In her autobiography, she demonstrates her disappointment with the overtly chauvinistic biases of the Arab National Movement leaders; she describes their efforts as failing to recognize that an essential pre-requisite for the liberation of Palestine and the Arab homeland is the equal treatment of all Palestinians (males and females) within society and their associated participation within the Palestinian national movement.³⁹ Despite what appears to be an increasing prevalence of women participating in terrorist organizations and the expansion of roles within these groups, to include planning and executing combat operations, there continue to be few women who achieve notable leadership positions. This fact may verify Bloom's assertion that participation in VEOs

³⁵ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 229.

³⁶ Ibid, 230.

³⁷ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 230.

³⁸ Cunningham, "Cross-Regional Trends," 187.

³⁹ Cragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*, 13–14.

has failed to achieve gender equality for those females who associate their participation with such ideological pursuits.⁴⁰

b. Social Movement/Social Mobilization Theory

While many may continue to discount the threat posed by female terrorists, their increasing numbers and expanded roles as planners and combatants within IEOs seem to suggest the confluence of ideological desires and strategic objectives amongst individual women, leaders, and society, itself, in direct response to external pressures.⁴¹ A body of literature indicates that while, historically, leftist organizations, those fighting for state independence and liberal nationalism, have tended to offer women a larger space within which to participate, particularly as combatants; increasingly, right-wing and more culturally and religiously conservative organizations are widening the scope of female participation as a direct result of organizational strategy in response to external influences.⁴² Social movement/social mobilization theory analyzes political environments and cultural structures in an attempt to explain how groups, which are traditionally outside of established state systems, utilize collective action to initiate reform and incite revolution.⁴³ In attempting to understand the roles of women within IEOs, as well as attempting to identify whether or not there are causal factors contributing to a perceived increase in female participation and expansion in associated roles and responsibilities, social movement/social mobilization theory provides an avenue by which to contextualize these questions. The means by which women become mobilized, whether to achieve personal (private), ideological (public), or organizational goals, will help shed additional light on the increasingly alarming threat that female terrorists pose.

⁴⁰ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 244–245.

⁴¹ Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends,” 185.

⁴² Jacques and Taylor, “Female Terrorism,” 509.

⁴³ Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007), 16.

c. Radicalization Theory

After years of research and analysis, scholars agree that there is no identifiable profile for jihadists. These individuals come from extremely diverse gender, religious, ethnic, social, financial, and educational backgrounds and, as such, their ideologies and experiences make it extremely difficult to pinpoint a single attribute that contributes to the potential for radicalization. Similarly, most recent scholars acknowledge that there is no single path to radicalization; instead, radicalization can be described as a gradual process that can stop at any particular juncture. Hafez and Mullins contend that radicalization is broken up into three distinct phases: socialization brought about by some sort of mechanism; followed by indoctrination into a radical belief system; resulting in (almost) unavoidable violence.⁴⁴ Within this process, the elements of radicalization (i.e., any particular juncture point) matter more than the progression from one point to the next; these elements include grievances, networks, ideologies, and enabling environments and support structures.⁴⁵ As illustrated by Jacques and Taylor, it was not until the mid-2000s that literature began to focus on the topic of female terrorism. Increasingly, the roles of women within IEOs have garnered additional attention, resulting in the need to analyze whether or not the radicalization process differs between men and women. More importantly (and pragmatically), such research is important because, to date, most counterterrorism policies and intervention programs targeted against Islamic radicalization have focused on addressing the grievances of men and boys. Until similar attention is focused on addressing the process by which women become radicalized within IEOs, the world will continue to face the threat of Islamic terrorism. In this context, understanding how females become radicalized within Islamist extremist organizations will shed additional light on countering future terrorist recruitment and operations.

⁴⁴ Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38 (2015): 960.

⁴⁵ Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle," 961, 970.

6. Conclusion

Regardless of their motivation, source of recruitment, or means of radicalization, women have become crucial members of today's terrorist organizations. As so eloquently stated by Bloom, "The 'exploding womb' has replaced the 'revolutionary womb'...Leaders of terrorist movements routinely make cost-benefit calculations to select the most effective tactics, targets, and operatives. Their analysis has shown that women are deadly."⁴⁶

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Authorities on the subject tend to define participation in terrorism in terms of three analytical frameworks: structural causes, or political, economic, or social grievances that prompt anger and motivate individuals; participation as part of social networks; and radicalization.⁴⁷ Based on the previously examined literature, several potential hypotheses emerge to help explain the apparent increase in participation and expansion of roles of women within IEOs.

1. H1: Women have become more assertive within Muslim societies and are, in fact, in charge of their own destinies. Their (increased) participation within Islamist extremist organizations is a reflection of advances they have made within Muslim societies.

H1 assumes that women are more active generally, and that with this comes more activity in all fields—without questioning the dominant framework of Islam and women's roles in Islam. Muslim women have already achieved some level of equality/parity within their religion and/or within their societies and, as such, play an equal role in political activism and VEOs. While this may apply more appropriately to those women who have been exposed to more Western cultures and are more familiar with Western societal norms in which women possess the same rights, privileges, and freedoms as their male counterparts (i.e., those women radicalized in the West, Western female converts to Islam, and a large number of the more recent female foreign fighters and jihadi brides who have joined in participation with AQ and ISIS); one cannot discount that those who

⁴⁶ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 34.

⁴⁷ Cragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*, 12.

adhere to a strict interpretation of the *Qu'ran* (particularly within the growing Islamic Feminist ideology that emphasizes a return to Qu'ranic teachings) acknowledge the natural equality between men and women.

2. H2: Women are strategically recruited and operationalized in order to achieve particular organizational objectives (whether societal, ideological, or combatant).

H2 assumes that women serve a strategic purpose for IEOs. As such, in their endeavors to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of multiple variables with regard to the recruitment of future terrorists; logistics; planning, orchestration, and execution of operations; as well as propagandizing of their message, leaders are increasingly seeking out female participation within extremist organizations in order to achieve specific objectives.

3. H3: Women are seeking increased equality and legitimacy within society; they view participation in political activism and increased involvement in Islamist extremist organizations as a means by which to achieve these ends.

H3 is effectively a feminist hypothesis—women are using Islam as a means to gain equality; this is purposeful involvement to obtain strategic ends. In contrast to H1, this hypothesis argues that Muslim women have not achieved religious and/or social equality/parity with their male counterparts and, as such, seek such equality through seemingly expanded roles and responsibilities via participation in political activism and VEOs. As described within the literature review, this seems to be a progressive step along the political spectrum, particularly when one's ideological goals are not achieved via more peaceful means (non-violent protests, boycotts, etc.).

4. H4: Religiously and culturally conservative Islamist extremist organizations have become more reflective of leftist, nationalist organizations in their stated objectives; as such, like in other national movements, increasing female participation and expansion of roles/responsibilities is a natural progression along the spectrum of political activism.

H4 suggests that IEOs tend to possess ideologies and objectives that reflect those of traditional leftist, national movements. As such, the participation of women is an inherent function along the spectrum of political activity.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis will explore the phenomenon of female participation in IEOs in order to identify the roles held by women within these organizations as well as the causal factors contributing to their involvement. A key aspect of this research will be to determine whether or not there has been a noticeable increase in female participation, as well as an expansion in associated responsibilities, within IEOs over the course of the last three decades. Assuming that women have become increasingly involved within these organizations, the researcher seeks to determine the causal factors which have contributed to the role of women evolving from one of primarily support and logistics to one of combatant and leader. Based upon the findings, this thesis will seek to provide policy considerations for confronting increased female participation within IEOs as well as potential areas for additional research.

In order to determine the roles, responsibilities, motivations, and causal factors for increased participation, this thesis will include a case study comparison between the following three IEOs: the Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS), al-Qaeda (AQ), and the Islamic State (ISIS). HAMAS, the oldest of these organizations, was founded in 1987, shortly after the outbreak of the First *Intifada*; as such, all research will be focused on female participation within these three organizations over the course of the past three decades. The intent is to explore the participation of women within these three IEOs over the course of their individual histories; since each of these groups developed at different times, the case studies will each explore the history of female participation in the context of the history of the organizations themselves. Major areas of research will include the following: roles (sympathizers, supporters, logisticians, recruiters, suicide bombers, fighters, and operational leaders), motivations, differences in gender considerations, means of recruitment and mobilization, and a comparison between organizational ideologies and use of female members.

Of note, since it not only represents an IEO but also a nationalist movement, the inclusion of HAMAS within the case study comparison will serve as a counterpoint to the case study reviews of AQ and ISIS. By including HAMAS, the researcher will be able to test H4 (hypothesis of nationalist organizations). In H4, the researcher hypothesizes that

IEOs tend to possess ideologies and objectives that reflect those of traditional leftist, national movements. As such, the participation of women is an inherent function along the spectrum of political activity. HAMAS represents both an IEO and a nationalist movement and, as such, the researcher believes that its inclusion within the case study comparison will indicate distinct similarities between it and AQ as well as ISIS. If found, these similarities demonstrate that both AQ and ISIS also possess more nationalist ideologies (establishment of a state, development of security forces, codification of laws, etc.). Additionally, the inclusion of HAMAS serves as a counter-point to that of AQ and ISIS in that its functions and activities extend beyond that of pure violence.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

This thesis is divided into four main chapters, each sub-divided into applicable sub-sections. The first three main chapters focus on one of three organizational case studies, with sub-sections reflecting the major areas of research. The final chapter serves to evaluate the evidence put forth in the three previous chapters and seeks to identify a theory or theories that best explains the phenomenon being researched. The previously proposed hypotheses are revisited in order to provide concluding remarks, policy recommendations, and potential areas for additional research.

II. ISLAMIC RESISTANCE MOVEMENT

A. INTRODUCTION

To examine the evolving roles of women within Islamist extremist organizations (IEO), this thesis begins with a case study of an ethno-religious nationalist movement. Such movements have historically incorporated women, recognizing that both men and women have a role to play in defeating an identified oppressor in pursuit of a nationalist project; consider the combatant and guerilla roles filled by women in Algeria, Zimbabwe, Palestine, and Kenya during their nationalist struggles for liberation. “Nationalist ideology is an anti-colonial, anti-imperialist ideology that mobilizes oppressed, dispossessed populations, and does not have any tolerance at all for gender issues. There is no space in nationalism for gender differences.”⁴⁸ As such, how does a nationalist endeavor coincide with a fundamentalist, conservative religious ideology? To that end, this thesis begins with an examination of the Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS) in order to identify the evolving roles that women play within this organization.

Despite serving as “the only example of a duly elected and overtly militant government in the Middle East,” Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya (HAMAS) is designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union.⁴⁹ As such, HAMAS, which is arguably an ethno-religious nationalist movement, serves as a unique case study when analyzing the evolving role of women within IEOs. As a pragmatic and adaptable organization, HAMAS has routinely reassessed the means by which it seeks to achieve its ultimate goal of an Islamic state in all of Palestine. Through its open competition with leftist and secular organizations, its reinterpretation of religious texts and jurisprudence, and its strategic and tactical employment of women within charitable, political, and militant wings, HAMAS has (unwittingly) re-opened space within the public domain for women’s participation. While its fundamentalist

⁴⁸ Muriel Tillinghast and Patricia McFadden, “Women and National Liberation Movements,” *Yale Journal of Law and Liberation* 2, no. 1, Article 1 (1991): 4.

⁴⁹ Steve A. Young, “A Basis for Middle East Islamic Extremism,” *Professional Issues in Criminal Justice: A Professional Journal – Special Issue: Terrorism* 2, no. 1 (2007): 12.

ideology promotes a doctrine that most Westerners and Western feminists view as subordinating the role of women in society, the emergence of HAMAS's "new Islamic woman" seems to highlight what might be deemed an Islamist women's movement in Palestine.⁵⁰ Contrary to Western perceptions, the women of HAMAS do not perceive themselves as victims of Islamization, but rather as fully endowed agents in disseminating its principles while simultaneously fulfilling their ambitions.⁵¹

B. BACKGROUND

Palestinian women have a long history of participation in political activism (both violent and non-violent), despite living within a conservative patriarchal society. Their initial resistance took the form of demonstrations against the construction of Jewish settlements pre-dating the British Mandate era. Subsequently, during the initial awakening of Palestinian nationalism in the 1920s, women became some of the first advocates for Palestinian independence. In order to aid the ultimate goal of Palestinian self-determination, these women established charitable organizations and women's associations to support the local Palestinian communities through social work, to resist incursion onto their lands, and to seek support from Arab leaders. It must be noted that the initial participation of women in these forms of political activism was not relegated to the supportive roles of wives, daughters, and sisters. In fact, women took up arms, collected intelligence, procured weapons, and couriered materiel and supplies as part of the resistance to the British occupation. These early notions of a woman's role alongside her male counterparts opened up space for women within the public sphere. Women routinely marched alongside and in front of the men, often physically protecting them from British authorities who were hesitant to open fire on women, demonstrated alongside men, and took up arms in defense of their homeland and in pursuit of

⁵⁰ Islah Jad, "Between Religion and Secularism: Islamist Women of HAMAS," in *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, ed. F. Nouria-Simone (New York: The Feminist Press, 2014), 262–263.

⁵¹ Jad, "Between Religion and Secularism," 265.

Palestinian nationalism.⁵² It was not uncommon for women to organize demonstrations, to participate in rallies and protests, and to serve as visible advocates for the Palestinian cause. These early examples of political activism established a precedent for female engagement in the nationalist endeavor of the Palestinian people.

Their robust participation continued with the outbreak of the *Intifada* on 11 December 1987. As the Palestinian population rose up against Israeli occupation, “for the first time in the history of her culture, [the Palestinian woman] was involved in and indicted for acts of subversion and sabotage and jailed in Israeli prisons.”⁵³ Playing a vital role in the resistance, Palestinian women have been lauded for organizing demonstrations and protests, couriering information and materiel, distributing leaflets, donating blood, tending to the wounded, establishing alternative means of education, increasing social welfare support in order to accommodate women’s participation, circumventing curfews, establishing black markets and services to deliver food to neighborhoods cut off by Israeli forces, and providing physical protection to the male population.⁵⁴

In spite of their prominence in social and militant activism throughout the 1970s and 1980s, particularly as evident in their participation in the *Intifada*, women’s role in the Palestinian resistance and nationalist movements was subordinated with the rise of Islamist organizations and their fundamentalist ideology. With the increased occupation of the Palestinian territories in 1967 and the subsequent outbreak of the *Intifada*, Islamist organizations began to gain prominence in the resistance movement and nationalist endeavor. Attempting to unify their efforts, secular and leftist organizations joined with Islamist organizations in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. A direct consequence of this unlikely union was a decline in women’s public participation as they became

52 Linah Al Saafin, “The Role of Palestinian Women in Resistance,” *Open Democracy: Free Thinking for the World*, 17 April 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/linah-alsaafin/role-of-palestinian-women-in-resistance>; Eileen Kuttab, “Palestinian Women in the ‘Intifada’: Fighting on Two Fronts,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1993): 70–75; and Ellen Fleishman, “The Emergence of the Palestinian Women’s Movement, 1929–39,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000): 16–32.

53 Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* (United States of America: Rodale Inc., 2003), 9.

54 Kuttab, “Palestinian Women in the Intifada,” 76–81; Victor, *Army of Roses*, 9–10; and Cragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*, 25, 30, and 113.

relegated to more traditional and subordinate roles as mothers, educators, and supporters.⁵⁵ However, as the peace process deteriorated and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Palestinian Authority (PA) were increasingly viewed as ineffective and corrupt, rising competition amongst the various secular and religious organizations created space for the re-emergence of women as key players in the resistance movement, the nationalist movement, and (most remarkably) the burgeoning foundations of state capacity and governance. The emergence of Islamist organizations as key players in Palestinian politics and the outbreak of the *al-Aqsa Intifada* changed the face of terrorism. Simultaneously, as these groups competed for support and operational space, their focus on the role of women re-introduced the topic of women's equality and the rights of women into the national dialogue.⁵⁶ By combining religion and nationalism, HAMAS became "an opposition movement setting itself against all forms of violation of civic and human rights."⁵⁷ In doing so, it helped create and develop "Islamist women, [who] forced a space...in which it was morally correct to be active in all spheres of public life."⁵⁸

Having been relegated to subordinate roles after the rise of Islamist organizations in the 1970s and 1980s, Palestinian women re-emerged as activists in the aftermath of the *al-Aqsa Intifada* and the failed peace process. Today, women continue to inject themselves into the political and militant wings of the predominant resistance movements and, most notably, are emerging as leaders in their own right. Leveraging all available opportunities to contribute to the cause for which they have sacrificed their families and themselves, the women of HAMAS have utilized the organization's pragmatism and adaptability to their advantage. While it is true that women are notably absent from the

55 Devorah Margolin, "A Palestinian Woman's Place in Terrorism: Organized Perpetrators or Individual Actors?," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39, no. 10 (2016): 918–920; Victor, *Army of Roses*, 11–12; S.V. Raghavan and V. Balasubramanian, "Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups: Progression or Regression?," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 15, no. 2 (July 2014): 200; Kristen Waymire, "Dynamics of Gender Ideology of HAMAS" (Proceedings of the 5th Annual GRASP Symposium, Wichita State University, Kansas, 2009): 66, http://soar.wichita.edu/bitstream/handle/10057/2309/GRASP5_28.pdf?sequence=1.

56 Margolin, "A Palestinian Woman's Place in Terrorism," 918–926 and Islah Jad, "Islamist Women of HAMAS: Between Feminism and Nationalism," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 12, no. 2 (2011): 176–197.

57 Jad, "Islamist Women of HAMAS," 196.

58 Ibid.

most senior sectors of HAMAS's militant and political activities, with no woman having served as a member of the political bureau that makes binding decisions for the organization, the world cannot deny the significant and evolving role that the women of HAMAS have played in their various capacities within this organization.⁵⁹ From mothers, educators, social workers, and supporters to organizers, demonstrators, fighters, martyrs, and politicians, the women of HAMAS have demanded space within the organization, slowly opening the doors for increased participation. In the context of the operational, cultural, religious, and political environment of the Palestinian resistance movement and quest for self-determination, HAMAS has come to recognize the vital roles that women serve within both the family and the society.

HAMAS was founded in 1987, shortly after the outbreak of the *Intifada*, as the Palestinian off-shoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. With its stated goal of liberating Palestine and establishing an Islamic state, HAMAS effectively co-opted the nationalist ideology of the secular PLO within an Islamic framework. In doing so, in the pursuit of its national aims, HAMAS justified its calls for *jihad* with religious texts and prophetic traditions.⁶⁰ This early example of HAMAS's ability to adapt its extremely dogmatic doctrine in order to achieve its stated nationalist aims serves as an example for its future evolution as both a militant Islamist extremist organization and an oppositional party. The precedent established in its initial entrance as a formal organization in opposition to the reigning authority within the occupied territories set the tone for routine organizational assessment and change as the environment warranted. When confronted with religious, social, political, and operational challenges, HAMAS successfully adapted its policies and strategies to leverage the most beneficial tactics and operations. Specifically, one must consider its evolution on the permissibility of suicide bombing as a

59 Daa Hadid, "HAMAS Women Seek Bigger Political Role," *Washington Post*, 24 November 2006, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/24/AR2006112400628_pf.html and Adnan Abu Amer, "Women's Roles in HAMAS Slowly Evolve," *Al Monitor*, 02 March 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/women--role-hamas-gaza-leadership-social-mobilization.html>.

60 Waymire, "Dynamics of Gender Ideology of HAMAS," http://soar.wichita.edu/bitstream/handle/10057/2309/GRASP5_28.pdf?sequence=1.

form of martyrdom, its entrance into formal politics, its acceptance of women martyrs and combatants, and its inclusion of women as legislative representatives.

C. A SPACE FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

From its inception and with the publication of its charter in 1988, HAMAS has recognized the role women play in establishing “a moral society based on the moral family”; thus, its gender ideology and religious ideology cannot be separated.⁶¹ Articles 17 and 18 of the HAMAS charter are often cited as outlining the role of Muslim women within the struggle against occupation in pursuit of self-determination. Both articles seem to relegate Muslim women to separate and unequal roles within not only the organization itself, but more broadly within the resistance and nationalist movements. Most scholars reference these two articles as solidifying the subordinate and gendered role of women within HAMAS. Consider Article 17, in which HAMAS clearly states that “Muslim women have a no lesser role than that of men in the war of liberation; they manufacture men and play a great role in guiding and educating the [new] generation.”⁶² In Article 18, HAMAS further clarifies the primary role of women as mothers and educators, stating “women in the house and the family of *jihad* fighters...carry out the most important duty of caring for the home and raising the children upon the moral concepts and values which derive from Islam; and of educating their sons to observe the religious injunctions in preparation for the duty of *jihad* awaiting them.”⁶³ However, in terms of equal treatment and evolving opportunities, the value of these articles resides in the fact that they even exist. In devoting one of the charter's sub-headings to “The Role of Muslim Women” and two out of the thirty-six articles to the role of women within Palestinian society, HAMAS identified that Muslim women have a vital role to play within Palestinian society and the nationalist movement. Furthermore, the specific terminology that HAMAS used within its charter opened the door for future reinterpretation and organizational adjustment as the political, social, and operational environment within Palestine changed. Specifically, as

61 Jad, “Between Religion and Secularism,” 258–259.

62 “The Charter of Allah: The Platform of the Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS),” available through FAS.org, last accessed 10JAN2017, <https://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/880818.htm>.

63 Ibid.

referenced within Islah Jad's analysis and summation of interviews with militant women in justifying and legitimizing their various roles, "the text does not prohibit."⁶⁴ Consider Jad's summary of a paper presented by Khitam Abu Musa during an April 1997 workshop sponsored by the National Islamic Salvation Party's Women's Department:

In her paper, she interprets Islam as the religion that gave woman all her rights: education, free choice of a husband, inheritance (widely denied by custom), mobility (to participate in the call for the rule of God and *jihad*), proselytizing, and social or professional work...Khitam Abu Musa cites the authority of religious text to emphasize that 'the urge of women to develop (*intilaq*, i.e., to flourish) and participate in social life with all that entails, including meeting men, is an approach decided by the Islamic *shari'a* and prophet's *sunna*."⁶⁵

While the notion that "the text does not prohibit," is most accurately associated with the interpretation of religious texts, it can be extended to HAMAS's charter and, in doing so, opens up and legitimizes increased space for Muslim women within the public sphere. Such an interpretation has been utilized to justify increased educational opportunities for Palestinian girls and women, ostensibly providing them with increased access to the public sphere (despite segregation) in both the academic environment and the labor market. Furthermore, prior to establishing any official political party, HAMAS formed the Women's Work Committee in the late-1980s; it was established to focus on women's affairs and served as "a regulatory committee like any other in the movement, with its own budget and public activities."⁶⁶

D. WOMEN'S ROLES WITHIN THE ISLAMIC RESISTANCE MOVEMENT

1. Social Outreach and Political Activism

With HAMAS's establishment of the Hizb al-Khalas al-Watani al-Islami (KHALAS), or National Islamic Salvation Party, in 1995, HAMAS officially entered the

⁶⁴ Jad, "Islamist Women of HAMAS," 189.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 191.

⁶⁶ Adnan Abu Amer, "Women's Roles in HAMAS Slowly Evolve," *Al Monitor*, 02 March 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/women--role-hamas-gaza-leadership-social-mobilization.html>.

political arena as a viable representative for the Palestinian people and their national cause. Separate from HAMAS's militant wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, KHALAS presented an alternative option to the Palestinian people, who had become increasingly skeptical of the failing peace process and those within the recognized governing authority. Most notably, according to Jad, KHALAS "used, for the first time in the history of the Muslim Brother's Movement in Palestine, the language of 'rights' for different social groups, in particular for women and other disadvantaged groups,...which had rarely been targeted by the Brothers' activism."⁶⁷ Furthermore, in terms of female engagement and participation, the subsequent establishment of the Women's Action Department within KHALAS paved the way for increasing gender equality within HAMAS's political wing as well as increased focus on women's issues at-large. Augmenting the official political party, the Women's Action Department represented the Islamist path to "incorporating women into politics with the aim of creating the image of the 'new Islamic woman.'"⁶⁸ Jad's in-depth analysis of HAMAS's gender ideology illustrates the means and methods by which HAMAS opened space for increased women's participation.

As a corollary of HAMAS's increased focus on leveraging Palestinian women to achieve its political aims as a national movement, the women of HAMAS co-opted the party's language, religious rhetoric, and historical framing in order to demand greater inclusivity and expanded roles in both the organization and society.⁶⁹ Through the active engagement of women, the recruitment of female university students, and the opening of dialogue concerning women's issues, HAMAS's political wing established the foundations upon which the organization would later secure an unprecedented victory during legislative elections in 2006. There is no denying the crucial role that women played in securing HAMAS's 2006 victory: voters heading to the polls were reportedly confronted with "droves of HAMAS women activists, all wearing green sashes and green

⁶⁷ Jad, "Islamist Women of HAMAS," 178.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 180.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 177–197.

and white headbands, chanting and carrying posters and leaflets.”⁷⁰ As evidence of the evolving role of women within HAMAS’s political endeavors, HAMAS listed a number of women as candidates during the 2006 election.⁷¹ Six female HAMAS leaders were elected to parliament in 2006: Jamila al-Shanti, Mariam Farhat, Samira Halaiqa, Mona Mansour, Huda Naim, and Mariam Saleh. Additionally, the HAMAS government appointed Isra al-Modallal as its first female spokesperson in November 2013. Despite these advances within the political sector, female members of HAMAS still face resistance in their attempts to achieve parity amongst their male counterparts within the leadership of the organization. In a 2006 interview, Naim stated that her male counterparts were often “condescending” toward her and often “discouraged her from competing for key committee posts.”⁷² Furthermore, during a more recent 2015 interview, she stated “Despite the important leap that was achieved in the recent years, the representation of women within the HAMAS institutions needs to evolve, particularly in terms of their membership in HAMAS’s political bureau.”⁷³ In this statement, Naim highlights the absence of women in terms of making decisions or creating policies within the organization.

2. From Political Activists to Combatants and Facilitators

a. Introduction

Concurrent with the evolving and expanding roles filled by women within HAMAS’s political and social outreach initiatives, Palestinian women increasingly sought (and continue to seek) additional space within the militant operations of the organization. As previously stated, the existence of secular Palestinian resistance prior to the rise of Islamism with the 1979 Iranian Revolution provides the historical context for

⁷⁰ Beverly Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell, *HAMAS: The Islamic Resistance Movement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 203.

⁷¹ Of note, the number of female candidates offered by HAMAS was in part due to the quota system set by electoral law.

⁷² Hadid, “HAMAS Women Seek Bigger Political Role,” http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/24/AR2006112400628_pf.html.

⁷³ Abu Amer, “Women’s Roles in HAMAS Slowly Evolve,” <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/women--role-hamas-gaza-leadership-social-mobilization.html>.

female participation in political activism and political violence. The shift within Palestine from a secular to a religious oppositional struggle altered the means and methods available to women to participate within the public sphere. Despite having served as a vital force during the initial mass uprising against the Israeli occupation that broke out on 11 December 1987, women were subsequently relegated to the sidelines of political and militant activism of both the secular and religious organizations. However, with Yasser Arafat's infamous "Army of Roses" speech on 27 January 2002, the fate of females seeking to become involved in militant operations was forever changed.

b. Permissibility of Women's Participation

Initially, HAMAS leaders were adamant against employing women within combatant roles. While struggling to reconcile conservative beliefs with evolving terrorist tactics, HAMAS's leadership found itself in competition with Arafat's secular FATAH, particularly after its al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade dispatched the first female Palestinian suicide bomber in January 2002. Sheikh Ahmed Ismail Yassin, HAMAS's founder and spiritual advisor, initially condemned the use of a female bomber, stating that his organization did not need women in its *jihad*, because they served as "the second defense line in the resistance of the occupation."⁷⁴ However, recognizing the operational difficulties associated with the movement of male terrorists within the increased security environment, combined with the strategic advantages that accompanied the use of female combatants, his previous assessment regarding the role women could play within HAMAS's *jihad* made a volte face with the deployment of Reem Saleh Riyashi, HAMAS's first female suicide bomber, on 14 January 2004.

As with previous adjustments to its doctrine, strategy, and tactical operations, the employment of women within its militant wing represents a practical adaptation that HAMAS made in order to secure strategic and tactical advantages. Once again, HAMAS's spiritual and organizational leaders turned to religious texts, historical examples, and the organization's charter in order to justify changes. In terms of religious

⁷⁴ Alisa Stack-O'Connor, "Picked Last: Women and Terrorism," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 44 (2007): 98, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a517958.pdf>.

justification, Syrian writer Nawaf al-Takruri cites no less than six *fatwas* that have been issued, referencing verses from the *Qu'ran* as well as historical examples of the female members of the Prophet's family and his early followers who took up arms in defense of the faith, allowing women to participate in martyrdom operations.⁷⁵ In fact, in the immediate aftermath of Wafa Idris's martyrdom operation, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a Doha-based Islamic scholar and head of the European Council on Fatwa and Research issued a *fatwa* that authorized Muslim women to disregard certain codes of dress and Islamic law in the performance of suicide operations.⁷⁶ Of note, despite public pronouncements by HAMAS's senior spiritual and organizational leaders regarding the role of women in martyrdom operations, al-Qaradawi's aforementioned *fatwa* appeared on HAMAS's website in January 2004, the same month Riyashi carried out her attack. Despite the issuance of *fatwas*, discrepancies regarding the spiritual rewards and financial remunerations for male and female martyrs persisted, not to mention the initial operational restrictions set by Yassin, who stated that no women should be able to undertake *jihad* without a male chaperone.⁷⁷ However, popular criticism and operational necessity forced Yassin to adapt his position regarding female martyrs, and, within half-an-hour after Riyashi carried out her attack, he told reporters that "*jihad* is imperative for all Muslim men and women."⁷⁸ Subsequently, in 2006, al-Qaradawi issued another *fatwa*, stating "I believe a woman can participate in this form of *jihad* according to her own means and condition. Also, the organizers of these martyr operations can benefit from some believing women as they may do, in some cases, what is impossible for men to do."⁷⁹ With this statement, not only did al-Qaradawi seem to create space for women having their own, distinct roles in martyrdom operations; he also provided the tactical justification for their use.

75 David Cook, "Women Fighting in Jihad?," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 380.

76 Farhana Qazi, "The Mujahidaat: Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam," in *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, ed. Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry (Athens: University of Georgia Press: 2011), 45.

77 Cook, "Women Fighting in Jihad?," 381.

78 Arnon Regular, "HAMAS Leader: Jihad is an Imperative for Women Too," *Haaretz*, 15 January 2004, <http://www.haaretz.com/hamas-leader-jihad-is-an-imperative-for-women-too-1.110997>.

79 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, "The Female Jihad," Gatestone Institute, 10 March 2010, <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/1099/the-female-jihad-1>.

Despite the aforementioned examples, discrepancies persist amongst religious opinions regarding the validity of female martyrs and their role as suicide bombers and combatants. While *fatwas* may not legitimize female operatives and suicide bombers, they do provide religious justification and cover for use by the organization and its leaders. In doing so, these organizations are further defended against public criticism that call into question HAMAS's adherence to religious, social, and familial norms. In addition to religious justification, by presenting a "trans-historical" frame based upon the historical past as a "golden age," HAMAS was able to conflate the old with the new and, thus, in referencing old values and traditions, presented the "new" as "sacred."⁸⁰ In short, just as suicide terrorism became the new *jihad*, female suicide bombers became the new form of suicide terrorism. Finally, in Article 12 of its charter, HAMAS's leadership conflates nationalism and religious faith, stating "Nothing is loftier or deeper in nationalism than waging *jihad* against the enemy and confronting him when he sets foot on the land of the Muslims. And this becomes an individual duty binding on every Muslim man and woman; a woman must go out and fight the enemy even without her husband's authorization, and a slave without his masters' permission."⁸¹ Within its own charter, HAMAS lays the foundation for an open interpretation of the appropriate role to be filled by women in undertaking *jihad*. In doing so, HAMAS created a built-in safety net that would enable it to adapt and evolve its doctrine and operations as dictated by the environment.

c. Suicide Bombers

While HAMAS is most noted for its use of suicide bombers and considerable attention has been given to the role of females in these operations, research in support of this master's thesis has discovered only two successful examples of women carrying out suicide bombings in the name of HAMAS: Reem Saleh Riyashi, HAMAS's first female suicide bomber, and Fatma al-Najar, Palestine's oldest suicide bomber. Aside from these two female martyrs, Dareen Abu Aisheh also successfully carried out a martyrdom

⁸⁰ Cindy D. Ness, "In the Name of the Cause: Women's Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 361–362.

⁸¹ "The Charter of Allah," FAS.org, <https://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/880818.htm>.

operation in the name of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade in March 2002, but only after she had been denied by HAMAS.⁸² Other organizations have employed women as suicide bombers as part of the Palestinian resistance towards Israeli occupation, but the total numbers of successful female martyrs pale in comparison to what mass media, government, and academic sources would have the general public believe. While there is no accurate way to measure the number of women who failed to carry out successful suicide missions, either through operational error, technical failures, or arrest, there is some data that provides additional information concerning those women who have been imprisoned in conjunction with plans to carry out suicide attacks. A more accurate depiction of female participation within the more militant operations of HAMAS includes their roles as logisticians, recruiters, leaders, and fighters.

d. Planners, Fighters, Leaders, Recruiters, and Logisticians

The women of HAMAS have also served in multiple roles beyond that of suicide bomber. Most notably, in 2001, Ahlam Aref Ahmad al-Tamimi executed two separate operations at the behest of HAMAS. Al-Tamimi is most recognized for her role in assisting with the bombing of the Sbarro pizzeria on King George Street in downtown Jerusalem; the attack killed 15, including two American citizens, and wounded 130. According to Mia Bloom, al-Tamimi is amongst HAMAS's most important operatives, having served as "a HAMAS planner responsible for one of the deadliest attacks in Israel's history. Her rise to prominence and ability to influence others shows beyond a shadow of a doubt that women are not the weaker sex and inherently more peaceful than their male counterparts."⁸³ As of March 2017, the Federal Bureau of Investigation added al-Tamimi to its Most Wanted Terrorist list and requested her extradition from Jordan, where she has resided since her 2011 release from an Israeli prison. Prior to the Sbarro attack, al-Tamimi carried out an unsuccessful attack in which she emplaced an explosive hidden within a beer can in a small supermarket in Jerusalem. In *Army of Roses*, Barbara Victor provides an in-depth profile of al-Tamimi, whom she refers to as "Zina."

⁸² Rosemarie Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc.: 2006), 39–40.

⁸³ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 32.

Interestingly, al-Tamimi's initial terrorist activity was in support of FATAH's *Tanzim*. Having failed to carry out a successful operation for Tanzim, al-Tamimi actively sought to become a member of HAMAS and requested to be utilized operationally.⁸⁴ Having gathered intelligence in advance to identify a suitable location prior to the pizzeria attack, al-Tamimi assisted in coordinating the attack and accompanying the suicide bomber to the intersection of King George Street and Jaffa Road. Not having detonated the bomb, al-Tamimi was convicted by an Israeli court for her logistical support and not as a HAMAS combatant. Like al-Tamimi, Iman Asha was sent by HAMAS to detonate an explosive device at a bus station in Tel Aviv in August 2001. It is noteworthy that "neither of these women...intended to die, nor did they, in the course of carrying out their operation."⁸⁵

In contrast to al-Tamimi's very violent participation, women within HAMAS have also filled key roles within the organization as community organizers, recruiters, committee leaders, facilitators, and trainees. One such example is Jamila al-Shanti. Besides serving as one of HAMAS's elected representatives to the Palestinian Legislative Council, al-Shanti has organized marches and sit-ins in opposition to Israeli incursions into Gaza. Most notably, during the November 2006 Israeli operations in the Gaza neighborhood of Beit Hanoun, al-Shanti is credited with developing the successful tactic of using human shields around the homes of HAMAS leaders in order to deter Israeli air strikes.⁸⁶ She is also known for directly encouraging the women of HAMAS to take a more active role in the fight against Israel. Her efforts were crucial in establishing the organizational capacity that contributed to women successfully freeing HAMAS male fighters from a Beit Hanoun mosque, where they had been pinned down by Israeli forces for more than thirty-six hours.

More interestingly, despite previous reluctance to include women as fighters within the organization, several reports indicate that HAMAS is actively recruiting and

84 Victor, *Army of Roses*, 9–10; Cragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*, 131–148.

85 Ness, "In the Name of the Cause," 365.

86 Rory McCarthy, "Sisters, Mothers, Martyrs," *The Guardian*, 05 December 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/dec/05/gender.israel>.

training teenage girls and women as members of its Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigade. As early as August 2005, the HAMAS-affiliated Palestine Information Center website posted pictures of dozens of young women who had joined its militant wing and were being trained in emplacing roadside bombs, firing rockets and mortars, and infiltrating Jewish settlements.⁸⁷ Indicative of the training that HAMAS women are receiving, the *New York Post* reported in October 2005 that Israel had arrested HAMAS operative Samar Sabih, “the first known female bomb-maker of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict.”⁸⁸ In an ironic play on the general assumptions regarding female participation as subordinate to that of males and the notion that the male-dominated patriarchal leadership of HAMAS is preying upon the frailty of women, the information provided by the Israeli spokesperson included the fact that Sabih had been training her husband in explosives and bomb-making. Beyond its use of adults, HAMAS has also established training camps for teenage girls as young as fifteen years-old, reportedly providing training in small-arms weapons, first aid, self-defense, hand-to-hand combat, field skills, and maneuvering.⁸⁹ These camps indicate that HAMAS continues to recognize the benefit of female participation within its militant wing and is actively developing females as future combatants. These camps provide Palestinian girls seeking such opportunities the outlet for increased militant political activism. Having previously established the religious justification for their participation, HAMAS has increased its operational capacity while retaining its traditional and fundamentalist religious doctrine. In doing so, it has maintained the popular support necessary to sustain its movement and the resistance.

87 “HAMAS Recruits Women Terrorists and Plans New Training Site in Destroyed Jewish Towns,” *Militant Islam Monitor*, 08 September 2005, <http://www.militantislammonitor.org/article/id/1060> and Harry De Quetteville, “HAMAS Women’s Wing Takes Up Weapons ‘For Love of Jihad,’” *The Telegraph*, 02 October 2005, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/1499743/Hamas-womens-wing-takes-up-weapons-for-the-love-of-jihad.html>.

88 Uri Dan, “Bride and Boom: Newlywed Bomb Duo in Israel Bust,” *The New York Post*, 12 October 2005, <http://nypost.com/2005/10/12/bride-and-boom-newlywed-bomb-duo-in-israel-bust/>.

89 Meira Svirsky, “HAMAS Runs First Paramilitary Camps for Schoolgirls,” *Clarion Project*, 07 September 2015, <https://clarionproject.org/hamas-training-women-new-paramilitary-camps-9/>; Jessica Chasmar, “13,000 Teens Graduate HAMAS Terror-Training Camps,” *The Washington Times*, 15 January 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jan/15/13000-teens-graduate-hamas-terror-training-camps/>; and “HAMAS Ramps Up Recruitment of Female Terrorists as Young as 15,” *Jewish News Service*, 25 July 2016, http://www.jns.org/news-briefs/2016/7/25/hamas-ramps-up-recruitment-of-female-terrorists-trains-girls-as-young-as-15#.WOBSy_nyteU=.

E. CONCLUSION

Throughout its thirty-year history, women have served in multiple capacities within HAMAS. However, it must be noted that there are significant challenges to fully analyzing the extent of female participation within this organization. Specifically, the available research on HAMAS and the women of HAMAS, in particular, is limited and primarily consists of secondary sources, which routinely reference the same state-published reports and/or other academics' research.⁹⁰ Additionally, when primary information is available, in the form of reported interviews and/or government/military-published reports, analysis of the available data is complicated by the routine omission of organizational affiliation, the propensity for individuals to withhold organizational affiliation, and/or the trend of young fighters switching group allegiance in order to expedite membership and/or operational use.⁹¹ Recognizing these analytical limitations, it is still possible to provide a broad overview of the evolving role of female participation within HAMAS. From mothers and educators to martyrs and legislative representatives, "a significant number of women demand more responsibilities in the struggle against the occupation, challenging traditional grassroots roles,...tak[ing] up military training and embrac[ing] violence."⁹² Whether through acts of martyrdom or political organization, these women are exerting their influence on HAMAS and demanding institutional and organizational change.

90 For consideration: The National Counterterrorism website has not updated its Terrorist Groups page for HAMAS since January 2014. This is in comparison to the group pages for Al Qaida and the Islamic State, both of which appear to be currently maintained.

91 Zaki Chehab, *Inside HAMAS: The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement* (New York: Nation Books, 2007), 90.

92 Filipa Pestana, "HAMAS and the Women's Movement: Islamism and Feminism under Occupation," *E-International Relations*, 12 January 2016, <http://www.e-ir.info/2016/01/12/hamas-and-the-womens-movement-islamism-and-feminism-under-occupation/>.

III. AL-QAEDA

A. INTRODUCTION

While HAMAS's foundations as an ethno-religious nationalist movement arguably created space for women's participation, as is typical of nationalist organizations, the same desired goal of state independence and liberal nationalism is not espoused by global jihadist organizations. The women of HAMAS rely on their long history of political, social, and militant activism as a precedent for their continued participation within the organization. Furthermore, the wording within HAMAS's charter opened up and legitimized increased space for Muslim women to have more active roles within the public sphere, including state-building functions. In comparison, al-Qaeda (AQ) represents a global jihadist organization with efforts focused externally instead of on any nationalist agenda. In contrast to traditional theoretical approaches that argue culturally and religiously conservative organizations generally limit women's participation within the public sphere, women have increasingly participated within AQ's global *jihad*. The following analysis illustrates that, whether as recruiters, trainers, fighters, planners, or suicide bombers, the increasingly participatory and active roles of women within AQ has brought them onto the frontlines of battle.

B. BACKGROUND AND PERMISSIBILITY OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

In "Women Fighting in *Jihad*?, " Cook provides an analysis of religious text, prophetic tradition, and Islamic jurisprudence in order to determine the legality of women actively fighting in support of *jihad* and participating in martyrdom operations. According to his research, despite classical interpretations of religious texts, prophetic traditions, and Islamic jurisprudence that depict an overwhelmingly negative discourse regarding the role of women in *jihad*, contemporary Islamic scholars, religious ideologues, and leaders of Islamist extremist organizations (IEO) have modified their interpretations in order to garner a broader support base and enable women to undertake

greater operational roles, including martyrdom operations.⁹³ While AQ is arguably one of the most traditional IEOs, espousing an extremely conservative and patriarchal worldview, debates amongst the ranks of its religious ideologues and operational commanders persist regarding the appropriate role of women in relation to *jihad*. Regardless of these debates, those women seeking to serve in a more active and combatant role within the organization are able to reference specific verses, traditions, and interpretations that justify their evolving roles as logisticians, recruiters, suicide bombers, fighters, and leaders. Specifically, al-Bukhari provides the following:

The Messenger of God would enter into the house of Umm Haram daughter of Milhan...The Messenger of God fell asleep and then woke up, laughing. She said: Why are you laughing? He said: People from my community [Muslims] were shown to me fighting in the path of God, sailing in the midst of the sea like kings on thrones. She said: O Messenger of God, pray to God that I might be one of them! And so the Messenger of God prayed for her...and she sailed the seas during the time of Mu'awiya b. Abi Sufyan, and fell from her mount when she disembarked and perished.⁹⁴

Beyond this prophetic tradition, there are historical accounts of the Prophet's female relatives and companions taking up arms in the context of *jihad*: Nusayba, also known as Um 'Umara, took up a sword and suffered twelve wounds during the Battle of Uhud; Safiya, the Prophet's aunt, decapitated a Jewish attacker during the Battle of Khadaq; and Aisha, one of the Prophet's wives, made rousing speeches and led troops from atop her camel during the Battle of Basra.⁹⁵ Furthermore, al-Takrurir references no-less-than six *fatwas* permitting women's participation in martyrdom operations.⁹⁶ Most relevant to modern would-be *mujahidat* aligned to AQ are the interpretations and operational decisions that have come directly from the organization's ideological leaders and operational commanders. Specifically, in *The Role of Women in the Jihad against Enemies*, 'Ayyiri references seven female fighters, all of whom participated in actual

93 Cook, "Women Fighting in Jihad," 375.

94 Ibid, 375.

95 Cook, "Women Fighting in Jihad," 376–377 and Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism: Understanding Jihadi Movements Worldwide* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), 238.

96 Cook, "Women Fighting in Jihad," 380.

violence and combat operations, throughout Islamic history. Furthermore, he proclaims that the current *jihad* is *fard ‘ayn*, incumbent upon all Muslims—male and female, without regard to parental or spousal permission. While he does not go so far as to call upon Muslim women to take up arms and join their male counterparts on the battlefield, he seems to have “laid the intellectual ground for the full participation of women in *jihad* among radical Muslims,...indicat[ing] a desire to open women up [for] consideration” as both fighters and martyrs.⁹⁷

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, former al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) commander, was the first AQ leader to formally address the role of women in jihadi operations. In a July 2005 audio address, Zarqawi called upon Muslim women to take a more active role in *jihad*. Despite receiving admonishments from AQ’s then second-in-command, Ayman Zawahiri, who, in December 2007, explicitly stated that women ought not adopt operational roles, specifically as fighters and martyrs, within the organization, “by 2007, female suicide bombers had become the weapon of choice for AQI.”⁹⁸, ⁹⁹ Internal debates regarding the role of women within the organization as well as the role of women in *jihad* continue. Despite this fact, would-be *mujahidat* rely on the evolving opinions of religious ideologues and increasingly radical leaders in order to justify their evolving roles as fighters and martyrs for AQ’s cause. According to Hassan Abu Haniya, an Amman-based analyst of Islamist groups, “While the traditional jihadists limit women’s participation in *jihad* to supporting militant men in activities such as nursing, teaching and moral support; the new ideologues have begun to mention female participation in armed actions in their literature.”¹⁰⁰ The use of women within suicide operations carried out by AQI sparked a revolutionary transition in ideology and tactics for the overall organization. Subsequent to their use as suicide bombers, specific cases provide evidence

⁹⁷ Cook, “Women Fighting in Jihad,” 381–382 and Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, 238–239.

⁹⁸ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 213.

⁹⁹ Of note, by 2007, Zarqawi was no longer the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The combination of increased coalition efforts and the Sunni Awakening created tremendous military pressure on the terrorist organization. As a result, in an effort to circumvent enhanced security measures and bolster combatant numbers, AQI’s leadership may have recognized the strategic and tactical advantages that women presented, despite previous prohibitions on their active participation as combatants and martyrs.

¹⁰⁰ Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Is the Role of Women in al-Qaeda Increasing?,” BBC News, 07 October 2010, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11484672>.

of the evolving role of women within the organization, to include women serving as combatants and agents, recruiters and propagandists, trainers, operational planners, logisticians, lone actors, and even as leaders.

Historically, the extent to which women have actively served within violent conflict, particularly within IEOs such as AQ, has been confined to support roles. As espoused by Osama bin Laden, Zawahiri, and other AQ personalities and publications, their main role is to give birth to fighters and raise them in support of the *jihad*. In 2004, *al-Khanssaa*, an AQ publication released by the Saudi Arabian-based Arabian Peninsula Women's Information Bureau, reiterated the primary roles of women as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters, and as educators, propagandists, and preachers of Islam. However, in a remarkable shift away from these traditional roles, *al-Khanssaa* added that women are called to serve as *jihad* warriors. Specifically, "There are many ways a Muslim woman can participate in *jihad*...The sister's role on the battlefield is: 1. Participation in the actual fighting; 2. Supporting the fighters in the battlefield, 3. Providing guard duty and protection."¹⁰¹ Furthermore, reiterating 'Ayyiri's earlier pronouncement, "When *jihad* becomes a personal obligation, then the woman is summoned like a man, and need ask permission neither from her husband nor from her guardian, because she is obligated."¹⁰² Despite such pronouncements, as well as evidence of increasing women's participation, Zawahiri sparked controversy during a 2007 broadcast, during which he declared that AQ neither had women members nor encouraged their participation beyond passive roles as mothers, wives, and household care-takers. Echoing her husband's sentiments, Omaima Hassan published a statement in December 2009, reiterating that a woman's proper role in serving the *jihad* "is to preserve the *mujahideen* in their sons, and homes, and their confidentiality, and to help them raise/develop their children in the best way."¹⁰³ However, like Islamic scholars and ideologues before her, Hassan seemed to open the way for increased participation by acknowledging that *jihad* is an obligation for

¹⁰¹ Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, 242.

¹⁰² Mia Bloom, "Mother. Daughter. Sister. Bomber. Women Are Increasingly Taking a Leading Role in Conflicts by Becoming Terrorists – Specifically." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 61, no. 6 (2005): 61.

¹⁰³ Mark Schone, "Al Qaeda Reaches Out to Women," ABC News, 18 December 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/al-qaeda-reaches-women/story?id=9364879>.

all Muslim men and women and suggesting that women may serve within “martyrdom missions.”¹⁰⁴

C. ROLES OF WOMEN WITHIN AL-QAEDA

As the operational environment has evolved, so too have the ways in which women fulfill their obligation of *jihad* in support of AQ and its affiliates. While the central organization’s most senior leadership continues to espouse a very traditional role for women, the world has witnessed increasing female participation, to include physically taking part in AQ’s operations. While scholars and strategists may not fully understand the role that women will play in the future of AQ and its affiliates’ operations, the following review of some of the most widely documented and analyzed instances of women’s participation in support of AQ’s global *jihad* illustrate that “al Qaeda’s component parts will remain a deadly threat to its enemies thanks in part to these women’s efforts—whatever form those efforts take.”¹⁰⁵

1. Suicide Bombers

In March 2003, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* published an interview with a woman calling herself Um Osama, the self-proclaimed leader of AQ’s female fighters, i.e., the *mujahidat*. According to Um Osama, her AQ cell was composed of multiple squads of female suicide bombers, directly under the orders of bin Laden to carry out attacks against the United States of America. Most notably, Um Osama emphasized that this cell consisted of women from multiple ethnic and national backgrounds and that it was “open to all Muslim women wanting to serve the [Islamic] nation.”¹⁰⁶ Fast-forward to 28 September 2005, as the world bore witness to the first recorded AQ-associated female suicide attack in Iraq; this attack represents the first instance of AQ (or one of its affiliated groups) utilizing a woman in a combatant role. Very little is known about AQI’s first female suicide bomber, except for the fact that she was not searched by

¹⁰⁴ Schone, “Al Qaeda Reaches Out to Women,” <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/al-qaeda-reaches-women/story?id=9364879>.

¹⁰⁵ Huda al Saleh, “The Women of Al-Qaeda,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, 05 January 2014, <http://english.aawsat.com/2014/01/article55326613/the-women-of-al-qaeda>.

¹⁰⁶ Bloom, “Mother. Daughter. Sister. Bomber.,” 61 and Von Knop, “The Female Jihad,” 404.

security forces despite being dressed in men's attire—a fact that should have raised suspicion in and of itself. On 28 September 2005, a woman successfully breached the Tall Afar checkpoints and carried out her suicide mission, targeting a U.S. military recruiting center that had previously served as an Iraqi Army recruiting center in Talafa, Iraq.¹⁰⁷ The Malik Suicidal Brigades claimed responsibility for the attack and Zarqawi later posted a statement to the Internet, in which he lauded her *jihad*: “A blessed sister...carried out a heroic attack defending her faith...May God accept our sister among the martyrs.”¹⁰⁸ This attack represented a shift in the use of women by AQI; furthermore, it highlighted the advantages that women present as a tactical weapon due to cultural and religious traditions and customs, which provided them with greater freedom of movement in comparison to their male counterparts, who were highly scrutinized as a result of counter-terrorism operations. Furthermore, according to Bloom, AQI senior leadership took advantage of the unidentified suicide bomber's gender, using it as means to shame more Iraqi men into carrying out martyrdom operations at a time when foreign fighter volunteers far outnumbered their Iraqi male counterparts. “Zarqawi found it useful to exploit the image of a desperate Iraqi woman throwing herself into battle because there were not enough brave men to step up.”¹⁰⁹ Subsequently, on 09 November 2005, simultaneous suicide operations were carried out by female operatives on behalf of AQ in both Jordan and Iraq, for which AQ issued a statement claiming responsibility.¹¹⁰ Increasingly, it appeared as if Zarqawi recognized the tactical advantage that women presented in an environment that had become less hospitable to his male operatives. On that same day, Belgian citizen Murielle Degaugue altered history as the first European Muslim female convert to carry out a suicide attack in Iraq, ramming her explosives-filled vehicle into an American military patrol in Baquba, Iraq. Her suicide mission claimed the lives of five policemen and wounded one American soldier.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 209–210 and Von Knop, “The Female Jihad,” 402–403.

¹⁰⁸ Von Knop, “The Female Jihad,” 402.

¹⁰⁹ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 210.

¹¹⁰ Bloom, *Bombshell*, 211 and Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, 240.

¹¹¹ Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, 242 and Von Knop, “The Female Jihad,” 403.

Beginning in 2007, Iraq witnessed an increasing trend in female suicide bombers, which seems to coincide directly with successful counter-terrorism operations that contributed to significant losses within AQI in the Diyala, Baghdad, and Anbar provinces; in 2008, thirty-five female suicide bombers were linked to AQ, a drastic increase from seven the previous year.¹¹² Unlike their male counterparts, whose numbers were greatly augmented by foreign fighters, the vast majority of the growing number of female suicide bombers in 2007 and 2008 were Iraqi. Coinciding with previous successful suicide attacks carried out by women in support of AQ and in the face of mounting loss of manpower, it appears as if AQI began to use a new method of warfare—female suicide bombers. These women served as a strategic asset and offered an operational advantage, particularly when standard tactics were no longer working. Wenza Ali Mutlaq, who detonated her suicide vest on 22 June 2008, killing herself and fifteen others, is representative of the Iraqi female population that volunteered and/or was coopted to serve as suicide bombers for AQ. Like many other young women from the regions in which AQI was most successful in its use of female suicide bombers, Mutlaq previously lost male relatives due to fighting, martyrdom operations, or detention; she maintained a remote existence that precluded access to many of life's modern conveniences and technological advancements; and, the traditional, conservative, and patriarchal ideology of the society in which she was raised prohibited educational and social opportunities that would have presented her with a future beyond that of her remote village. Often, facing despair and desperation, these women turn to martyrdom operations in an attempt to reclaim some aspect of their own personal worth and honor.¹¹³

AQ's use of female suicide bombers extends beyond operations in Iraq. In September 2003, twin sisters, Imane and Sana Laghriff, were arrested in Rabat, Morocco and accused of planning suicide attacks against the Moroccan Parliament, a liquor store,

¹¹² Tuty Raihanah Mostarom, "Al Qaeda's Female Jihadists: The Islamist Ideological View," RSIS Commentaries, No. 014, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 06 February 2009, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/1172-al-qaedas-female-jihadists/#.V27kMLgrJeU>.

¹¹³ Alissa J. Rubin, "Despair Drives Suicide Attacks by Iraqi Women," *The New York Times*, 05 July 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/05/world/middleeast/05diyala.html>.

and members of the royal family. Both girls admitted to planning the attacks and were later sentenced for terrorist offenses in relation to what their lawyer argued was a failed mission at the behest of male members of a Salafia Jihadia cell, an AQ-affiliated group operating within northern Africa and Spain. According to Von Knop, their participation seems to have resulted from a great deal of manipulation by the male members of this cell.¹¹⁴ Echoing this sentiment, in the aftermath of their sentencing, many questioned the likelihood of “impoverished girls, barely into their teens, having the capacity, even if they had the intention, of carrying out such ambitious attacks.”¹¹⁵ In concert with the Degaugue suicide attack in Iraq on 9 November 2005, Jordanian Sajida Mubarak Arrous al-Rishawi attempted to detonate an explosive belt around her waist during simultaneous suicide attacks on three hotels in Amman, Jordan, claimed by the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi group, i.e., AQI. Due to the failure of her trigger cord, the Jordanian Security Services were able to arrest Rishawi. During interrogations, she provided no indication of her motivation, beyond her relationship to her husband, Ali Hussein al-Shumari, also a part of the mission, and her brother, Mubarak Atrous al-Rishawi, a senior aide to Zarqawi who had previously been killed by U.S. forces.¹¹⁶ Bloom suggests that Rishawi volunteered for this operation, using her recent marriage as plausible cover, in order to avenge the deaths of her male relatives who had been killed during their support of the *jihad*.¹¹⁷ More recently, in September 2008, Algerian police foiled an al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) plan to utilize a female suicide bomber in an attack on military barracks.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Bloom, “Mother. Daughter. Sister. Bomber.,” 60; Von Knop, “The Female Jihad,” 402; and “Girls Guilty of Terror Charges,” BBC News, 30 September 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/3153110.stm>.

¹¹⁵ “Girls Guilty of Terror Charges,” BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/3153110.stm>.

¹¹⁶ Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, 240 and Von Knop, “The Female Jihad,” 403.

¹¹⁷ Mia Melissa Bloom, “Death Becomes Her: The Changing Nature of Women’s Role in Terror,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 11, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2010): 94.

¹¹⁸ Mostarom, “Al Qaeda’s Female Jihadists,” RSIS Commentaries, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/1172-al-qaedas-female-jihadists/#.V27kMLgrJeU>.

2. Non-suicide Bombers

While many suggest that AQ's use of women as suicide bombers merely represents a tactical shift that takes advantage of the inherent benefits associated with the female gender operating within a male-dominated context of violent acts, women have served and continue to serve in essential roles necessary for the operational maintenance of the organization itself, as well as the missions it undertakes in support of its global *jihad*. Whether as combatants or agents, recruiters or propagandists, logisticians, lone actors, and leaders, women are increasingly seeking and being specifically targeted for more operationally oriented roles within AQ and its affiliated groups. One need look no further than the following examples in order to recognize that the role of women within AQ is indeed evolving, arguably for the better in terms of the group's operational capacity and to the detriment of counter-terrorism operations.

a. Recruiters, Propagandists, Logisticians, and Facilitators

Beyond the contributions that women have made to AQ's cause by serving as mothers and human bombs, over the last decade they have increasingly served as essential sources of inspiration for future generations of fighters and supporters. Serving as recruiters, organizers, proselytizers, teachers, translators, fund-raisers, and propagandists, these women are increasingly filling a void left absent by their captured and killed husbands and male counterparts. Von Knop's reference to Bentiwaa Farida Ben Bechir, a Tunisian woman whose role within her Italian-based cell was to recruit suicide bombers to send to Iraq, serves as such an example. Her efforts represent AQ's initiatives to recruit Westerners, who, by nature of their appearance and/or citizenship and residency, are able to move more freely and operate under less suspicion.¹¹⁹ Representing the evolving roles of women, beyond that of suicide bombers, in support of AQ's ideology and operational mission, some consider these functions even more detrimental to counter-terrorism efforts that have failed to destroy the ideological appeal and social networking of this organization and its affiliates.

¹¹⁹ Von Knop, "The Female Jihad," 404.

Particularly within the West, where women are accustomed to greater freedom of movement and gender equality, Muslim women attracted to AQ are increasing their participation in support of the organization, most notably in the ether of the easily accessible and limitedly controlled Internet. As an example, Malika El Aroud is considered to serve an important strategic role by inspiring a new generation of jihadists. She epitomizes the evolving role of AQ female recruiters and propagandists. Having achieved notoriety as the widow of a notorious martyr responsible for the assassination of anti-Taliban resistance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud, Aroud, otherwise known as Um Obeyda, gained prominence (amongst both AQ supporters and intelligence/security professionals) as one of the most prolific Internet jihadist operating out of Europe. As such, she is considered by European intelligence officials to be one of the leading women within a growing movement of female Islamists attempting to take (if necessary, create) larger, more active roles within AQ's male-dominated global *jihad*. Describing herself as a "female holy warrior for al Qaeda," Aroud views her efforts to spread the organization's ideology and recruit members to its cause as essential to AQ's stated mission.¹²⁰ Using writing as her weapon of choice, she has inspired countless men and women to take up arms in support of AQ, encouraging violent acts of terrorism as well as rallying women to the cause.¹²¹ Similarly, in what some consider a major step in the evolution of the organization's "female wing," through her online activism and 2010 article published by AQ's media branch, Wafa al-Shihri encourages women to become active participants in the organization's global *jihad*. The fact that an AQ-funded and managed publication includes her opinions is even more telling given the outright denial by its most senior commanders of the operational significance that women actually play within the organization.¹²²

¹²⁰ Elaine Sciolino and Souad Mekhennet, "Al Qaeda Warrior Uses Internet to Rally Women," *The New York Times*, 28 May 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/28/world/europe/28terror.html?_r=0.

¹²¹ Sciolino and Mekhennet, "Al Qaeda Warrior Uses Internet," *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/28/world/europe/28terror.html?_r=0.

¹²² al Saleh, "The Women of Al-Qaeda," *Asharq al-Awsat*, <http://english.aawsat.com/2014/01/article55326613/the-women-of-al-qaeda>.

While most literature echoes the sentiment of fundamentalist thinkers such as Hassan Al Banna and Sayyid Qutb, whose conservative views were instrumental to the construction of AQ's traditional ideology regarding the roles of women, as well as bin Laden and Zawahiri's pronouncements that a woman's conventional role in *jihad* should be restricted to logistical and emotional support in the form of raising a new generation of fighters, tending to the wounded, feeding fighters, and encouraging husbands and brothers to join the cause; women aligned to AQ and its global *jihad* have increasingly taken on more active logistical roles, such as fund-raisers, financiers, couriers, protectors, bookkeepers, and operational planners. When not inspiring young men and women to join AQ's cause via her Internet postings, Aroud is believed to have served within a logistical capacity. Specifically, she was suspected of supplying her first husband with the electronic equipment that was utilized in the September 2001 assassination of Massoud. Along with twenty-two others, she was tried for complicity in the bombing, but was acquitted due to a lack of evidence. Subsequently, she was detained on suspicion of plotting to free Nizar Trabelsi, a convicted terrorist, as well as planning to attack a target in Brussels. Her arrest and conviction in 2007 for promoting acts of violence and supporting a criminal organization (AQ), combined with the aforementioned speculation of logistical involvement in planning AQ operations, highlights the evolving roles women serve within AQ's terrorist activities.¹²³ Cragin and Daly emphasize the crucial role that women have played as protectors for AQ and its affiliated terrorist organizations. Through marriage within the organization and its affiliated groups, as well as amongst the local families and tribes in the areas in which its various cells operate, AQ secures support and protection for its members and operations. In one example from 2008, AQ is reported to have "reconstituted a network of fighters and supporters in the border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan" as a result of familial relationships established through marriages between AQ fighters and local tribes.¹²⁴ Similarly, AQ-affiliated Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has historically utilized women in no-less-important logistical

¹²³ Sciolino and Mekhennet, "Al Qaeda Warrior Uses Internet," *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/28/world/europe/28terror.html?_r=0.

¹²⁴ Cragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists* 32.

roles, such as fundraising, bookkeeping, and serving as a conduit to strengthen ties through marriage within JI and amongst AQ and its affiliates.¹²⁵

b. Planners, Operatives, and Front-Line Combatants

Beyond the aforementioned roles as propagandists, recruiters, and logisticians, women have increasingly filled physically demanding operational roles in service to AQ and its associated organizations. In June 2003, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) identified Aafia Siddiqui as a suspected AQ agent, representing the first time the bureau had initiated a search for a woman since the opening of the War on Terror.¹²⁶ Subsequently, in September 2010, Siddiqui was found guilty and sentenced to eighty-six years for attempting to kill American agents operating in Afghanistan in 2009. In response to her conviction, *as-Sahab Foundation for Islamic Media Publication*, which disseminates AQ messages and propaganda, released a video in an attempt to use the story of Siddiqui's arrest to incite anger and resentment amongst AQ's supporters as well as to encourage increased recruitment amongst its members.¹²⁷ Similar to Siddiqui's role as an operative in Afghanistan, the late-April 2005 attack on a tourist bus in Cairo by two veiled Egyptian women, Negat Yassin and Iman Ibrahim Khamis, represents another example of women filling increasingly combatant roles in service to AQ's global *jihad*. Reportedly injuring three bystanders before turning their guns on themselves, their attack serves as the first time women were involved in a terrorist attack in Egypt. The Abdullah-Azzam Brigades, otherwise known as AQ in Lebanon, later claimed responsibility for the attack. It remains unclear whether or not this was a suicide mission; as such, these two young women can be identified as combatants, who were equally supporting the cause for which their brother and fiancé died during a suicide attack on a bus station near the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities just hours before.¹²⁸ Representing an evolution in the

¹²⁵ Bloom, "Death Becomes Her," 94; Cragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*, 32–33; and Mostarom, "Al Qaeda's Female Jihadists, RSIS Commentaries, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/1172-al-qaedas-female-jihadists/#.V27kMLgrJeU>.

¹²⁶ Von Knop, "The Female Jihad," 404.

¹²⁷ al-Shishani, "Is the Role of Women in al-Qaeda Increasing?," BBC News, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11484672>.

¹²⁸ Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, 240 and Von Knop, "The Female Jihad," 402.

role of women from passive supporters to active combatants in AQ's global *jihad*, Haylah al-Qassir, also known as Sayida al-Qaeda, is considered "one of the most active and effective AQ operatives in Saudi Arabia."¹²⁹ According to additional information obtained by *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Qassir served an essential role within AQ, securing funding as well as new recruits. She has since been charged in association with a host of criminal activity, including "aiding and abetting AQ members, possessing weapons used in terrorist attacks, and inciting others to commit terrorist acts."¹³⁰

In addition to the aforementioned examples, one of the most interesting repercussions of the conflict in Syria is the fervor with which women have joined the cause and are becoming increasingly involved as militants within AQ and AQ-affiliated activities. According to *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, a Saudi woman named Nada Ma'id al-Qahtani, also known as Ukht Julaybib, announced on social media that she would be traveling to Syria to fight alongside her brother and other *mujahideen*; her announcement sparked a wave of online support and incited additional cries for increased female participation. In fact, some of the commentators likened her to other notorious AQ-affiliated widows, who, beyond being the wives of martyrs, have been accused by Saudi authorities of "organizing, financing, and providing ideological support" to AQ.¹³¹ More recently, an article published by *al Jazeera* in July 2014 highlights the story of a young Syrian woman seeking combat on the front-lines in support of AQ. Senior commanders within Jabhat al-Nusra, also known as AQ in Syria/the Levant, acknowledge that, with very rare exception, the few women operationally serving within the organization are fulfilling roles gathering intelligence. Recognizing this fact, Hala, a twenty-two year-old Syrian serving as a combatant for the organization, represents an anomaly. Admitting that securing a combat role alongside her husband was a condition of their marriage, Hala and her husband defected from another Salafi group fighting inside Syria in favor of Jabhat

¹²⁹ al Saleh, "The Women of Al-Qaeda," *Asharq al-Awsat*, <http://english.aawsat.com/2014/01/article55326613/the-women-of-al-qaeda>.

¹³⁰ al Saleh, "The Women of Al-Qaeda," *Asharq al-Awsat*, <http://english.aawsat.com/2014/01/article55326613/the-women-of-al-qaeda>.

¹³¹ Ibid.

al-Nusra because the organization “welcome[d] her and her *jihad*.”¹³² During her interview with *al Jazeera*, she admitted that her combat experience has been limited, primarily being assigned with the task of holding fronts that had previously been won by male counterparts. Representing what appears to be a growing trend amongst young female supporters of AQ and its affiliates, Hala seeks additional combat experience, having previously requested to accompany her husband during missions in Aleppo and even volunteering for a suicide mission.¹³³

c. Lone-Wolf Actors

In addition to the evolving roles that women are adopting and being identified to fill within the organization itself, although rare, women have begun to operate in “lone wolf” capacities in order to fulfill what they view as their obligation to serve AQ’s global *jihad*. In her chapter entitled “Targeting Herself: Female Lone Actors,” Runeborg analyzes the only two documented cases of female lone actors who have operated in the context of jihadist terrorism; specifically, she presents cases of two women who have been inspired by and operated in support of AQ and its affiliates. Roshonara Choudhry, who planned and carried out a violent attack on British Member of Parliament (MP) Stephen Timms on 14 May 2010, represents the first example of an AQ sympathizer attempting to carry out an assassination in Britain. After just six months, having become self-radicalized after researching and listening to speeches and lectures by Anwar al-Awlaki, Choudhry embraced AQ’s ideology, planned and coordinated a meeting with Timms, and carried out her attack on the MP, stabbing him repeatedly in an attempt to kill him in retaliation for his support of Britain’s involvement in the Iraq war. Choudhry was immediately arrested, freely answered her interrogator’s questions, and was subsequently found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. Similarly, Colleen LaRose, also known as Jihad Jane, became self-radicalized after conducting online searches; in 2008, LaRose began searching for online video of people suffering in areas

¹³² Rania Abouzeid, “Syrian Al-Qaeda Women: Searching for Combat, Martyrdom on the Front Lines,” *al Jazeera America*, 20 July 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/7/20/syrian-women-qaedarebels.html>.

¹³³ Abouzeid, “Syrian Al-Qaeda Women: Searching for Combat,” *al Jazeera America*, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/7/20/syrian-women-qaedarebels.html>.

of conflict. Subsequently, she posted a comment to YouTube in which she acknowledged her desire to do something to aid the suffering Muslim population. This single post initiated a series of conversations with contacts around the globe, with whom she shared her desires and willingness to become a martyr, commit acts of violence including pledging to assassinate cartoon artist Lars Vilks, and utilize her physical appearance and American citizenship to travel freely throughout the Western world. She also intended to utilize her status to coordinate acquiring European residency for non-Western male members of jihadist organizations in order to enable increased freedom of movement. In the span of a little more than a year, LaRose coordinated with other would-be jihadists, scheduled her travels to Europe, and organized monetary contributions to organizations she believed were affiliated with AQ. On 09 March 2010, the U.S. Department of Justice released the indictment of LaRose, in which she was accused of “us[ing] the Internet to form a conspiracy to provide professional material support to terrorism, culminating in a direct order to LaRose to commit murder overseas.”¹³⁴

In both cases, the two women referenced grew up in Western societies, benefited from Western educational systems, and appear to have self-radicalized without any outside physical contact beyond the Internet. Both women established their motivations, developed their plans, coordinated their actions, and resolved themselves to carry out violent acts in support of AQ and its global *jihad*. More interesting than their self-radicalization is the fact that these two women represent two of the few references to women within AQ’s jihadist publication *Inspire*.¹³⁵ Furthermore, in an article published in *Inspire* from 2011, Choudry’s assassination attempt is lauded as a good deed in fulfillment of *fard ‘ayn*, and her example is used to shame Muslim men into further action: “Only a few brave people get to fulfill that special deed. A woman my brothers!...She felt the need to do it simply because our men gave all too many excuses to refrain from it...To the men of the Ummah: Take the example of this woman and you

¹³⁴ Hanna Runeborg, “Targeting Herself: Female Lone Actors,” in *Understanding Lone Actor Terrorism: Past Experience, Future Outlook, and Response Strategies*, ed. Michael Fredholm (New York: Routledge, 2016), 141.

¹³⁵ Runeborg, “Targeting Herself: Female Lone Actors,” 140 and 142.

will find success in the afterlife.”¹³⁶ Through her analysis, Runeborg concludes that such examples of women conducting lone acts of terrorism serve as one of the few ways in which women are able to independently undertake violent operations within otherwise male-dominated, traditional, and conservative organizations that relegate the role of women to either passive participation or suicide missions, both of which are at the sole discretion of the organizational leadership.¹³⁷

d. Leaders

Echoing Um Osama’s 2003 claim to be the leader of AQ’s female fighters, several other women have either been identified or self-identified as occupying prominent roles within AQ. Specifically, multiple websites reference Um Salameh, who allegedly serves as “the emir of the ‘Al Nitaqayn’—women’s battalion in al Qaeda.”¹³⁸ Istisam Adwan, also known as Um Fatima and “the mother of all female suicide bombers,” was arrested by Iraqi authorities in September 2008; like Um Osama, she warned of an all-female group, consisting mainly of AQ widows, that was training younger generations for future attacks. Subsequently, in January 2009, Samira Ahmed Jassin, claiming the same aforementioned title, confessed to Iraqi authorities that she had recruited vulnerable women in Iraq to serve in future suicide bombing missions.¹³⁹

D. MOTIVATIONS AND CAUSAL FACTORS FOR WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION

From the examples presented, it is clear that women are increasingly serving within more operationally oriented and combatant roles within AQ. To better attempt to understand why this evolution has taken place, it is important to consider the motivational factors for both these women and the organization itself. It is difficult to develop a terrorist profile; years of research have indicated that individuals are motivated for various reasons, ranging from extremely personal desires for revenge to more group-

¹³⁶ Ibid, 152.

¹³⁷ Runeborg, “Targeting Herself: Female Lone Actors,” 136–155.

¹³⁸ Mostarom, “Al Qaeda’s Female Jihadists,” RSIS Commentaries, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/1172-al-qaedas-female-jihadists/#.V27kMLgrJeU>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

oriented desires for a sense of belonging. Furthermore, there seems to be little, if any, difference between the factors that motivate those, whether male or female, who participate in violent extremism, particularly in suicide attacks. However, it seems that within extremely traditional, patriarchal societies, such as those found within the vast majority of the Muslim world, including within densely populated Muslim communities in the West, gender-based oppression is contributing as an additional motivating factor for female members of IEOs. In enabling and carrying out violent attacks and martyrdom operations, women within these societies are able to join the public sphere from which they are normally shielded; their participation within such attacks provides an avenue by which to fill a desire for power and honor within their male-dominated societies. Specifically, with regard to the motivation to become a suicide bomber, Bloom offers the following: “to avenge a personal loss, to redeem the family name, to escape a life of sheltered monotony and achieve fame, or to equalize the patriarchal societies in which they live.”¹⁴⁰ This sentiment is echoed by Beyler, who argues that in becoming “human bombs,” these women are calling attention to a specific issue, whether related to country, religion, leadership, or gender.¹⁴¹ As logisticians, recruiters, fund-raisers, and operational planners, women are increasingly serving in roles that contribute to AQ’s mission, well beyond the detonation of explosives during a single attack.

Furthermore, at the same time, it seems as if AQ’s leaders (operational, ideological, and religious) are increasingly recognizing the value of women operatives, particularly as suicide bombers and combatants. Like their Palestinian predecessors who sparked a wave of female suicide bombings during the Second *Intifada*, AQ-affiliated and tasked female suicide bombers offer multiple benefits, including tactical advantages, increased number of available combatants, and increased publicity and psychological impact.¹⁴² Beyond the desires of women themselves, numerous scholars have acknowledged the following as motivating factors contributing to AQ’s continued and

¹⁴⁰ Mia Bloom, “Female Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend,” *Daedalus* 136, no. 1 (2007): 95.

¹⁴¹ Clara Beyler, “Messengers of Death: Female Suicide Bombers,” International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 02 December 2003, <https://www.ict.org.il/Article.aspx?ID=854>.

¹⁴² Von Knop, “The Female Jihad,” 401 and Bloom, “Female Suicide Bombers,” 99–101.

growing acceptance of female participation: the advantages of cultural and religious traditions that limit the searching of women and afford them greater access beyond security checkpoints and across borders, universal perceptions that women are less violent and thus less likely to carry out violent crimes and terrorist attacks, the ability of women to conceal weapons and explosives under traditional clothing, increased media attention that serves not only to highlight the cause of the organization but also to motivate additional fighters to join the cause, the psychological impact that female fighters and suicide bombers have on societies which expect them to be loving and nurturing mothers and wives, as well as the benefits associated with the increasing number of global converts who are ripe for radicalization and afford organizations such as AQ increased access to new theatres of operations through their passports, marriage visas, and physical appearance.

E. CONCLUSION

Despite statements made by senior leaders and ideologues within AQ that clearly illustrate their perception of woman's subordinate role within society and that deny women active participation in AQ's global *jihad*, women are seeking, and even creating, greater roles for themselves in support of the organization's cause. Significantly, it is acknowledged that this appears to be a trend more common amongst Muslim women in the West, who have been educated within Western systems and are accustomed to a broader level of rights and equality. There is no denying that there is a confluence of factors that have contributed to the evolving roles that women fill in support of AQ and its affiliates. The combination of personal, organizational, and environmental motivations and causal factors has contributed to increased space for women's participation, beyond that of mothers and suicide bombers. The women of AQ are increasingly filling essential roles as recruiters, propagandists, logisticians, and facilitators. Furthermore, as an organization that espouses a global *jihad*, AQ benefits from the women who plan and execute global operations in its name. In the absence of representation amongst the organization's central leadership, the space that is freely opened to women's full participation in combat and martyrdom operations will likely remain limited. However, the lack of organizational permission is unlikely to dissuade those women who are

committed to the cause. Women are increasingly taking operational matters into their own hands, planning and executing attacks as part of networks and as independent actors, despite the misogynistic outward profile of the organization's central leadership and key ideologues. The increasingly participatory and more active roles of women within AQ is bringing them onto the frontlines of battle, drastically altering the traditional norms that have prohibited interaction between unrelated men and women. The opening of the operational environment to women will undoubtedly have a lasting impact in terms of AQ's evolving understanding of and relationship to female terrorists.

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IV. ISLAMIC STATE

A. INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State (ISIS) is an Islamist organization that has confounded the prior understanding of such organizational classification, as it is both jihadist globally but also has established a state. It combines elements of both prior types of Islamist organizations examined thus far within this thesis. While ISIS shares a global jihadist agenda with its predecessor al-Qaeda (AQ), it is the similarities in terms of state-building functions that it shares with the Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS) that make it a relevant case study to include in an examination of the evolving roles of women within Islamist extremist organizations (IEO). Women are necessary to legitimize the creation and development of the state; as such, with its stated goal of reestablishing the Islamic Caliphate in the Levant, ISIS needs women to achieve this aim. Like HAMAS's ethno-religious nationalist agenda, ISIS's religious state-building agenda has opened up space for women to increasingly participate in more public and violent roles. The fact that, like AQ, ISIS advocates for a global *jihad* contributes to the expanding and evolving roles that women are filling in support of this IEO.

By all accounts, ISIS is an extremely religiously and socially conservative organization, which prides itself on maintaining the patriarchal foundations of the societies from which it arose. Notorious for its treatment of women, including raping, enslaving, and torturing members of the female sex, it would seem as if ISIS would make little space for female participation within its state-building functions and global jihadist endeavors. Furthermore, the abundance of reporting and research highlighting ISIS's imposition of its strict interpretation of the *Qu'ran* and prophetic traditions, including its requirements for women regarding dress and comportment, would lead most to believe that it holds little appeal amongst Muslim women, particularly Muslim women born and/or raised within Western civilizations where liberal and democratic ideologies emphasize the values of equality and freedom. However, since its announcement of the reinstatement of the Islamic Caliphate on 29 June 2014, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as Caliph Ibrahim, ISIS has witnessed unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters joining its

ranks. In fact, the organization has successfully recruited hundreds of women from around the world to join its cause; most estimates place the number of foreign female fighters at approximately 10% of the foreign fighters who have migrated in support of ISIS.¹⁴³ “Never before in the modern history of terrorism has a group attracted so many women, particularly from the West.”¹⁴⁴

A review of the available information and research concerning female participation within ISIS highlights the lack of quantitative and qualitative data necessary to fully analyze and assess the level of participation of women within this organization. Thus, secondary sources of information have been utilized to analyze the evolving roles that women fill within ISIS. Despite a lack of unbiased reporting from within those regions controlled by ISIS, some general trends concerning the roles that women fill within the organization can be identified. Access to information contained within social media profiles and publications produced by regional media outlets, think tanks, academics, non-governmental organizations, non-profit organizations, security organizations, and governments provides a glimpse into the radicalization process, the women who are attracted to ISIS, the motivations that contribute to their active and passive support, and the realities of life for women living within ISIS’s self-proclaimed caliphate. A considerable amount of energy has been expended in order to attract women, particularly Western women, to the group. Once these women are recruited, additional resources are devoted to secure their safe arrival to ISIS-held territories. In fact, ISIS has dispatched lawyers on more than one occasion to help get women en-route to Syria out of

¹⁴³ Within the available research, there is considerable debate regarding the proper terminology to apply to those women and girls who have migrated from their home countries to the Middle East and North Africa in support of ISIS. While some hesitate to refer to these females as fighters, acknowledging that the vast majority never take up arms in support of combat operations; the failure to recognize that these women and girls are playing essential roles in support of a terrorist organization denies them of their agency and undermines international and national security efforts targeted at countering terrorist organizations and Islamic Extremist Organizations. To deny that these women and girls are filling roles essential to ISIS and providing the support necessary to legitimize and maintain its existence is naïve and unproductive. Whether they are cooking nourishing meals for their husband fighters or strapping on explosive belts, the women and girls who have sworn their allegiance (*bayat*) to ISIS warrant consideration as active participants within this Islamist Extremist Organization.

¹⁴⁴ Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State* (New York, Rowman & Littlefield: 2017), 123.

police/security custody in Turkey.¹⁴⁵ Whether or not these women are becoming combatants, which this analysis demonstrates that they are, they ultimately serve a purpose that warrants the time, energy, money, and effort the organization is expending to attract them to the cause. It goes without saying that women are necessary to legitimize the development of the state. Since ISIS's main goal is to establish an Islamic Caliphate, it needs women to do so. Recognizing this fact, ISIS and the women attracted to it have wittingly and unwittingly opened additional space for female participation within the organization itself and the state it is attempting to establish.

B. BACKGROUND AND PERMISSIBILITY OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

ISIS, as a patriarchal and overtly misogynistic organization, seeks to limit the roles that females fill within its movement. As argued by Nelly Lahoud, "It is not Islamic law that prohibits women from being warriors, but rather jihadis' fear of allowing any mixing between the sexes, that stands in their way."¹⁴⁶ The organization clearly understands that women are essential to achieving its stated goal of reestablishing an Islamic Caliphate in the Levant. To that end, ISIS strategically targets women for recruitment, focusing its resources and efforts to leverage existing motivations in order to garner support among local and foreign populations. Part and parcel of these targeted propaganda and recruitment campaigns is the fact that women and girls, particularly those from outside of the Middle East, are increasingly seeking more active roles in which to participate within the organization. Believing the various forms of propaganda and recruitment messaging with which ISIS floods social media, these women and young girls proclaim their desires to take up arms in support of ISIS, whether or not the organization's leadership ever intends to leverage these supporters in that capacity. In order to maintain its appeal while simultaneously legitimizing itself as an organization and state, ISIS has opened up additional space for female participation within its

¹⁴⁵ Anita Peresin, "Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 3 (2015), Terrorism Research Initiative, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/427/html> and Amanda N. Spencer, "The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in the Islamic State," *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, no. 3 (2016): 85.

¹⁴⁶ Nelly Lahoud, "Can Women Be Soldiers of the Islamic State?," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 59, no. 1 (2017): 69.

organization, its movement, and the Islamic Caliphate that it has proclaimed. Furthermore, as this research illustrates, female active and passive support for ISIS highlights the fact that women, like men, have a similar propensity for violence and that their participation as loyal followers should not be relegated to the sphere of naïve and/or brainwashed victims. This reality is highlighted by the following statement made by a Syrian women's rights activist from Raqqa: "You should pray that if Daesh [ISIS] catches you that it is the Daesh men. You can beg the men, you can apologize, there is a chance that they would limit their abuse to verbal. Daesh women have no hearts."¹⁴⁷

As a fundamentalist Salafi jihadist organization, ISIS maintains a very patriarchal social network, with a large number of its adherents hailing from similar patriarchal societies and/or conservative social upbringings. As an off-shoot of al-Qaeda, ISIS relies upon many of the same religious doctrines, traditions, and jurisprudence to justify its means and methods for advancing its reestablishment of the Islamic Caliphate in the lands of the Levant. Like its predecessors, ISIS relies on strict fundamentalist and Salafi interpretations of the *Qu'ran*, *hadiths*, and *sunna*. Pragmatically, like other Islamist extremist organizations before, it has become adept at selectively relying upon religious texts, doctrines, traditions, and interpretations in order to gain support, legitimize its actions, and adapt to an evolving battlefield. The rate and extent to which it has incorporated women and girls within its operational ranks is representative of its patriarchal nature. According to Lahoud, "The Islamic legal doctrine to which jihadis appeal to justify their activities is the same doctrine that makes it incumbent upon women to fight."¹⁴⁸ In other words, the defensive *jihad* that ISIS advocates amongst its adherents legitimizes female participation, making *jihad* an obligation for all Muslims, regardless of sex and age. This religious obligation serves as a motivating factor for many of the young women who risk their lives to travel to war-torn areas in the pursuit of swearing their allegiance to ISIS and contributing to its idealized vision of a restored Islamic

¹⁴⁷ Assad H. Almohammad and Anne Speckhard, "The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female ISIS Operatives: From Assassins and Morality Police to Spies and Suicide Bombers," International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 23 April 2017, <http://www.icsve.org/research-reports/the-operational-ranks-and-roles-of-female-isis-operatives-from-assassins-and-morality-police-to-spies-and-suicide-bombers/>.

¹⁴⁸ Lahoud, "Can Women Be Soldiers of the Islamic State?," 69.

Caliphate. While ISIS's leadership continues to limit the combat roles women fill within its Levant-based operations, they are taking on greater tactical roles outside of Iraq and Syria. This seems to indicate practical adaptation or ideological variability. Despite evidence that indicates most females who have pledged their allegiance to ISIS fill domestic roles, an increasing number of women and girls are contributing to ISIS's campaign through their evolving roles as propagandists, recruiters, enforcers, and even as armed combatants.

C. WOMEN'S ROLES WITHIN THE ISLAMIC STATE

1. Wives, Mothers, Teachers, State Facilitators, Propagandists, Recruiters, Logisticians, Fundraisers, and Critical Nodes

The vast majority of the women living within the group's controlled territories in Iraq and Syria lead domestic lives in service to their husbands, children, and the organization. A far cry from the Kalashnikov-toting female jihadis that have become synonymous with ISIS propaganda, most of these women fill their days with the mundane tasks of cooking for their husbands and children, taking care of household chores, and raising the next generation of ISIS's fighters. While significant attention has been paid to online social media profiles portraying a more combative role for women who have pledged their allegiance to ISIS, the reality for most women who move to ISIS's self-proclaimed caliphate is more in-line with the prescriptions found within the organization's de-facto treatise on the role of women, *Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women by the al-Khanssaa Brigade*.¹⁴⁹ Acknowledging their primary role as dutiful and obedient wives and mothers, Umm Ubaydah, one of ISIS's most notable online female personalities, writes explicitly that "the best thing for a women [sic] is to be a righteous wife and to raise righteous children."¹⁵⁰ For the women of ISIS, their place within the organization remains primarily within the home, taking care of domestic duties. Movement outside of one's home is highly restricted, particularly for the

¹⁴⁹ Winter, trans., *Women of the Islamic State*, Quilliam Foundation, <https://therinjfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/women-of-the-islamic-state3.pdf>.

¹⁵⁰ Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett, *Becoming Mulan?: Female Western Migrants to ISIS*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2015): 22, http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.pdf.

unmarried women living within the established women's hostels, *makkar*, owned and operated by ISIS. As such, despite the fact that marriage is not forced upon anyone, single women are encouraged to quickly marry one of the group's fighters upon their arrival to the caliphate. This reality of life under ISIS's control is highlighted by Umm Layth, who writes in her "Diary of Muhajirah," "I have stressed this before on Twitter, but I really need sisters to stop dreaming about coming to *Sham* and not getting married. *Wallahi* [I swear to God] life is very difficult for the *Muhajirat* and we depend heavily on the brothers for a lot of support."¹⁵¹ "Umm Ubaydah echoes this warning to women, explaining that it is hard to live without a husband: 'Sisters *wallah* being single in *sham* is extremely difficult, it's best if you're not married when coming, to mentally prepare yourself.'"¹⁵² To that end, ISIS established a special marriage bureau in Raqqa that handles matchmaking for those fighters and women seeking a spouse. Several defector interviews have indicated that women are ranked based upon ethnicity, nationality, and skin and hair color, with those from Western backgrounds being the most desirable. Furthermore, ISIS's foreign adherents, who are often viewed as more religiously devout and fiercer fighters, are given priority when selecting a bride. The preference for foreign brides, combined with the perception that the foreign women who join ISIS are granted greater freedom of movement, provided with more disposable income, and given additional perks, contribute to tensions between ISIS's native and foreign female populations which already face communication and cultural misunderstandings.¹⁵³

Beyond serving as "jihadi brides" and mothers to the "cubs of the Caliphate," the women of ISIS fill a variety of logistical and support roles necessary to the functioning and survival of the organization and the state it seeks to establish. Heeding al-Baghdadi's appeal for scientists, preachers, judges, doctors, engineers, and scholars to join the

¹⁵¹ Hoyle, Bradford, and Frenett, *Becoming Mulan?*, 23, accessed 12 January 2017, http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.pdf.

¹⁵² Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett, "Becoming Mulan?: Female Western Migrants to ISIS," Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2015): 23

¹⁵³ Peresin, "Fatal Attraction," <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/427/html> and Azadeh Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish, and Escape," *The New York Times*, 21 November 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html?_r=0.

caliphate, “the insurgency has attracted many foreign women under the notion that their skill sets will be both crucial and appreciated in building the caliphate.”¹⁵⁴ Shannon Conley, an American teenager who was arrested in April 2014 at the Denver airport before boarding a flight en-route to join ISIS, is representative of a Western woman wanting to answer al-Baghdadi’s call. While she told special agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation that she intended to use weapons and tactics training she received through the U.S. Army’s Explorers program in order “to go overseas to wage *jihad*,” it was her specialized skills as a licensed nurse’s aide that would have been more appealing to ISIS leadership.¹⁵⁵ Recognizing that they serve in support roles that are indispensable to the functioning of a proto-state, ISIS permits female teachers, doctors, nurses, and other professionals within the administrative and law enforcement sectors to step outside of the confines of their homes in service to their community.

Academics and journalists rely upon social media accounts of self-identified members and/or supporters in order to assess the current situation within ISIS-controlled territories; to compare the expectations prior to migrating with the realities on-the-ground; to conduct nodal analysis of the organization and the flow of information, funds, and materiel; to identify the sources of motivation for the group’s supporters; and to obtain a better understanding of the process of radicalization. In addition to advancing ISIS’s cause via their presence within online social networking forums, research indicates that women also serve as key logistical nodes, often planning and executing fundraising efforts, serving as conduits for information and operational plans, and transferring funds and materiel. In fact, a recent study conducted at the University of Miami concluded that “although men dominate numerically, women emerge with superior network connectivity that can benefit the underlying system’s [i.e. ISIS’s] robustness and survival.”¹⁵⁶ While sitting behind a computer may not necessitate advanced weapons training and does not

¹⁵⁴ Spencer, “The Hidden Face of Terrorism,” 86–87.

¹⁵⁵ Jenny Deam, “Colorado Woman’s Quest for Jihad Baffles Neighbors,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-high-school-jihadi-20140726-story.html>.

¹⁵⁶ Pedro Manrique, et al., “Women’s Connectivity in Extreme Networks,” *Science Advances* 2, no. 6 (10 June 2016): 1.

equate to combat operations, an increasing number of women and girls are filling some of the most vital roles necessary for ISIS's survival.

Global access to uncensored and decentralized use of social media serves as a powerful propaganda tool for ISIS. In the absence of a fearful external population and lacking a readily available pool of motivated recruits, ISIS would fail in its endeavors to reestablish the Islamic Caliphate within the Levant. In order to ensure that its enemies view it as a threat and its potential adherents follow calls to join in the *jihad*, ISIS relies upon targeted messaging specifically adapted for its various audiences. This is most evident in the disparity between online postings targeting Western audiences, particularly Western female audiences, compared to those targeting Middle Eastern female audiences. The online publication *Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women by the al-Khanssaa Brigade*, which was released in Arabic only, advocates the importance of women's primary roles as wives and mothers. Considered a more realistic representation of life under ISIS's control, this document highlights the primarily domestic and sedentary lifestyle envisioned for the women of ISIS. According to Charlie Winter, a Researcher and Program Officer at the Quilliam Foundation, "this manifesto will not have been translated [by ISIS] because it will have been deemed ineffective—perhaps even counterintuitive—in achieving its propagandistic aims with a Western audience."¹⁵⁷ In contrast, large numbers of Western women who have flocked to ISIS flood social media platforms with pictures of *abaya* and *niqab*-cladded women carrying Kalashnikov rifles, tweets professing their desire to carry out beheadings and martyrdom operations, and hashtags affiliating themselves with ISIS's *jihad*.

Whether in the form of modern and high-tech videos, blogs, private chatroom conversations, encrypted messaging, or official publications, ISIS uses mass media in order to spread its message globally. Part and parcel of this media campaign are the dozens of women who actively post pictures, hashtags, commentaries, instructions, advice, and various other propaganda material for the purposes of recruiting young men and women to ISIS. "These women meet through Twitter, Tumblr, Telegram, and Kik,

¹⁵⁷ Winter, trans., *Women of the Islamic State*, Quilliam Foundation, <https://therinjfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/women-of-the-islamic-state3.pdf>.

where they exchange verses of the *Qu'ran*, ISIL propaganda, statements from radical English- and Arabic-speaking preachers, and news of ISIL's [ISIS's] territorial advances."¹⁵⁸ The general public has become familiar with images of the Kalashnikov-toting female ISIS jihadi dressed in full *abaya* and *niqab*. According to some academics, ISIS's use of such imagery, "the empowered fighting female jihadi," taps into the personal experiences of growing up in Western societies that are dominated by the more liberal discourses of democracy, feminism, and equality, and are "clearly aimed at recruiting Western women."¹⁵⁹ Beyond recruiting new fighters, jihadi brides, and future mothers, the women who serve in an online presence encourage ISIS's supporters to carry out attacks in their home countries. At the same time, these women serve as a means to shame men into taking up arms in support of ISIS. Through their online media campaigns, the women of ISIS have become empowered and serve in important roles necessary to the functioning and longevity of the organization and its stated agenda. By distributing its narrative, promoting its cause, influencing others, and easing travels plans and the transition process for foreigners, ISIS's brigade of female online warriors have proven their value to the organization, securing themselves additional space within its operational ranks and the state that it is creating.¹⁶⁰

2. Morality Police as Torturers, Spies, and Enforcers

Battle-hardened militants were far from the most terrifying thing for many women living under their harsh rule in the ISIS-conquered city of Mosul. 'I was much more afraid of women,' said Umm Fatma, referring to female

¹⁵⁸ Mia Bloom and Charlie Winter, "The Women of ISIL," Politico, 07 December 2015, <http://www.politico.eu/article/the-women-of-isil-female-suicide-bomber-terrorism/>.

¹⁵⁹ Bloom and Winter, "The Women of ISIL," Politico, <http://www.politico.eu/article/the-women-of-isil-female-suicide-bomber-terrorism/>.

¹⁶⁰ Ellie Hall, "Inside the Chilling Online World of the Women of ISIS," Buzzfeed, 11 September 2014, https://www.buzzfeed.com/ellievhall/inside-the-online-world-of-the-women-of-isis?utm_term=.rcx6ex0kG7#.rfP0x9eXJZ. Reference this article for a brief overview of the online social media presence of ISIS's female members and supporters. Article includes screen captures from Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr feeds.

members of the terror organization's morality police, known as the *Hisbah*.¹⁶¹

A robust collection of reporting indicates that women have assumed roles as enforcers within the Islamic State.¹⁶² Most coverage indicates that the al-Khanssaa Brigade serves as ISIS's all-female morality police; there are even a few reports that reference the creation of additional all-female brigades for the purposes of enforcing ISIS's strict laws.¹⁶³ The all-female al-Khanssaa Brigade was established in Raqqa soon after ISIS took over the city in early 2014 and, subsequently, it filled a similar mission in ISIS-controlled Mosul. According to an ISIS official in Raqqa, "We have established the brigade to raise awareness of our religion among women, and to punish women who do

¹⁶¹ Lucy Kafanov, "How All-Female ISIS Morality Police 'Khanssaa Brigade' Terrorized Mosul," NBC News, 20 November 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/how-all-female-isis-morality-police-khanssaa-brigade-terrorized-mosul-n685926>.

¹⁶² Doha Hassan, "Meet Umm Hamza, The Slaughterer, NOW, 07 November 2013, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reports/features/meet-umm-hamza-the-slaughterer>; Kathy Gilsinan, "The ISIS Crackdown on Women, by Women: ISIS's All-Female Brigade and the Slowly Growing Role of Female Jihadis," *The Atlantic*, 25 July 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/the-women-of-isis/375047/>; Arwa Damon and Gul Tuysuz, "How She Went from a Schoolteacher to an ISIS Member," CNN, 06 October 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/06/world/meast/isis-female-fighter/>; Ben Winsor, "ISIS Is Actively Recruiting Female Fighters to Brutalize Other Women," Business Insider, 15 October 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-has-female-battalions-too-2014-10>; Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers," *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html?_r=0; Almohammad and Speckhard, "The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female ISIS Operatives," International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, <http://www.icsve.org/research-reports/the-operational-ranks-and-roles-of-female-isis-operatives-from-assassins-and-morality-police-to-spies-and-suicide-bombers/>; Jigmei Bhutia, "ISIS's Al-Khanssaa Brigade Kills Woman for Breast-Feeding Baby in Public in Raqqa," *International Business Times*, 28 December 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-al-khanssaa-brigade-kills-woman-breast-feeding-baby-public-raqqa-1535110>; Kafanov, "All-Female ISIS Morality Police Terrorized Mosul," NBC News, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/how-all-female-isis-morality-police-khanssaa-brigade-terrorized-mosul-n685926>; "Mother's Horror After ISIS Female Fighters Tear Daughter to Death with Metal Jaws," *Mirror*, 07 February 2017, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/isis-female-warriors-use-metal-9775094>; Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 125; and Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* (McLean, VA, Advances Press: 2016), 84, 93–94, 109, and 165.

¹⁶³ Winsor, "ISIS Is Actively Recruiting Female Fighters," Business Insider, <http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-has-female-battalions-too-2014-10>; Elena Veatch, "Women of ISIS: The Role of the Oppressed in Oppressing," *Foreign Policy Journal*, 12 December 2014, <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2014/12/12/women-of-isis-the-role-of-the-oppressed-in-oppressing/>; and Almohammad and Speckhard, "The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female ISIS Operatives," International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, <http://www.icsve.org/research-reports/the-operational-ranks-and-roles-of-female-isis-operatives-from-assassins-and-morality-police-to-spies-and-suicide-bombers/>.

not abide by the law.”¹⁶⁴ While most accounts highlight the brigade’s role in enforcing ISIS’s interpretation of Islamic dress and comportment, there are more than a handful of references citing the more sadistic punishments meted out at the hands of the women employed within its ranks. According to regional news services, the brigade was initially established to thwart anti-ISIS fighters and other members of the local male population who were attempting to circumvent ISIS check-points and authorities by dressing as women.¹⁶⁵ In an ironic twist, if these reports are in fact true, this would indicate that ISIS, unlike many military and security forces in similarly structured patriarchal societies (and even in some Western countries), has been able to evolve its utilization of women in order to confront the security risks posed by the cultural and religious norms that inhibit male security personnel from thoroughly searching women.

A far cry from simply staffing checkpoints, members of the brigade are reported to control all aspects of the guarding and sale of female sex slaves to ISIS fighters in addition to delivering such punishments as floggings, whippings, and bitings. In many instances, it seems as if members of the brigade act as judge, jury, and executioner—they often carry out various forms of corporal punishment, disfigurement, and torture without any official verdict from a religious court. In a review of reports concerning ISIS’s al-Khanssaa Brigade and/or the *hisbah* (police), the name Umm Hamza frequently arises as a key figure. Dubbed “the slaughterer,” Umm Hamza is reported to have arrived in Raqqa after it was “liberated” by ISIS.¹⁶⁶ With an AK-47 Kalashnikov rifle and dagger strapped to her back, shackles hanging from her waist, and electric cables in her hands, Umm Hamza has been identified as responsible for carrying out the brigade’s corporal

¹⁶⁴ Gilsinan, “The ISIS Crackdown on Women,” *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/the-women-of-isis/375047/>.

¹⁶⁵ Gilsinan, “The ISIS Crackdown on Women,” *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/the-women-of-isis/375047/>; Winsor, “ISIS Is Actively Recruiting Female Fighters,” *Business Insider*, <http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-has-female-battalions-too-2014-10>; and Veatch, “Women of ISIS,” *Foreign Policy Journal*, <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2014/12/12/women-of-isis-the-role-of-the-oppressed-in-oppressing/>.

¹⁶⁶ Hassan, “Meet Umm Hamza,” *NOW*, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/meet-umm-hamza-the-slaughterer>.

punishments of female prisoners at the Raqqa religious prison.¹⁶⁷ Beyond serving as a guard, she is alleged to have administered some of the most vicious abuses against females living under ISIS's control. According to one young woman, who was arrested and accused of fundraising without the Religious Committee's permission, Umm Hamza bound her, flogged her legs and feet with electric cables, and threatened to cut out her tongue with a dagger. Furthermore, Umm Hamza is alleged to have directly threatened this same girl stating "I really do slaughter. Pray to Allah that you don't spend the night here so that I don't plaster you to the wall and have fun with you."¹⁶⁸ To further illustrate the level of violence and control these women are capable of executing, Aisha, a mother of two who fled Raqqa, stated, "Women armed with electric shock sticks regulated our lives. If a woman is not totally covered, they will lash her 80 times on the street."¹⁶⁹

Beyond these examples of physical abuse, journalists and academics allege that the roles filled by the female members of ISIS's morality police have evolved to include torturing, mutilating, and even killing members of the female population within ISIS-controlled territories. Besides floggings, members of the al-Khansaa Brigade are purported to utilize a torture device known as "the biter,"—"metal prongs designed to clip chunks of flesh as punishment for women."¹⁷⁰ According to various sources, "the biter" has been used to enforce ISIS's laws regarding its strict interpretation of proper Islamic dress and behavior. In one defector account, a young girl was forced to choose between 40 lashes or having her breast bitten by a female member of the *hisbah* as punishment for walking on the street with her face uncovered; "the *hisbah* [using these metal teeth] bit her breast so violently that she died."¹⁷¹ In another account, a mother was

¹⁶⁷ Damon and Tuysuz, "How She Went from a Schoolteacher to an ISIS Member," CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/06/world/meast/isis-female-fighter/> and Hassan, "Meet Umm Hamza," NOW, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/meet-umm-hamza-the-slaughterer>.

¹⁶⁸ Hassan, "Meet Umm Hamza" NOW, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/meet-umm-hamza-the-slaughterer>.

¹⁶⁹ Bhutia, "ISIS's Al-Khansaa Brigade Kills Woman for Breast-Feeding," *International Business Times*, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-al-khansaa-brigade-kills-woman-breast-feeding-baby-public-raqqa-1535110>.

¹⁷⁰ Kafanov, "How All-Female ISIS Morality Police 'Khansaa Brigade' Terrorized Mosul," NBC News, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/how-all-female-isis-morality-police-khansaa-brigade-terrorized-mosul-n685926>.

¹⁷¹ Speckhard and Yayla, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories*, 94.

forced to choose between whether she or her daughter would suffer a similar punishment in response to her daughter having stepped over the threshold of her home unaccompanied. Believing the *hisbah* member meant to bite her daughter with her mouth, the mother chose for her daughter to receive the punishment. “She was horrified when the militants produced a hideous ‘metal biting device’ with poison on the teeth. The razor sharp fangs ripped through the youngster’s flesh before she bled to death.”¹⁷² Furthermore, this practice seems to have expanded beyond Raqqa. In an April 2017 National Public Radio report, an Iraqi high-school teacher, who was evacuated from Mosul by the Iraqi Army, stated that “ISIS members gathered the women to search them for gold, money, and documents...There was a woman who was searching them and the same woman was biting them—I swear to God she was biting them on their arms.”¹⁷³ A Human Rights Watch investigation documenting the suffering faced by ISIS’s female victims corroborates such reports; both the all-female units and their use of such a torture device are described in detail.¹⁷⁴ In another instance, female members of ISIS’s morality police poured acid on the faces of 15 Iraqi women in Mosul in February 2015 as punishment for improperly veiling themselves. Such forms of disfigurement by men are not uncommon in strict Muslim societies, such as Pakistan; however, the fact that this form of punishment has been carried out against Muslim women by other Muslim women seems anathema. Members of the all-female brigade have even been accused of killing women as punishment for perceived violations. A December 2015 news report claimed that the all-female brigade killed a woman in Raqqa as punishment for breastfeeding her baby in public. According to pro-ISIS media sites, “The woman had violated public decency and, as a result, was mutilated before she was killed.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² “Mother’s Horror,” *Mirror*, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/isis-female-warriors-use-metal-9775094>.

¹⁷³ Jane Arraf, “As Iraqi Forces Encircle Mosul, ISIS Unleashes New Level of Brutality on Civilians,” *Parallels*, National Public Radio, 18 April 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/04/18/524466679/as-iraqi-forces-encircle-mosul-isis-unleashes-new-level-of-brutality-on-civilian>.

¹⁷⁴ Kafanov, “How All-Female ISIS Morality Police ‘Khansaa Brigade’ Terrorized Mosul,” NBC News, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/how-all-female-isis-morality-police-khansaa-brigade-terrorized-mosul-n685926>.

¹⁷⁵ Bhutia, “ISIS’s Al-Khansaa Brigade Kills Woman for Breast-Feeding,” *International Business Times*, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-al-khansaa-brigade-kills-woman-breast-feeding-baby-public-raqqa-1535110>.

Over time, it appears as if the role of ISIS's brigades of female morality police has grown to include more active responsibilities with a more visible presence; the female enforcers serve as prison guards, torturers, and spies.¹⁷⁶ It is not known whether this role has evolved as a result of official changes in ISIS's policies regarding female participation within the more combative roles undertaken by the organization or, rather, the roles filled by members of this brigade have taken on increased levels of violence as a result of the personalities who fill them. Several personal accounts from former female members of the al-Khanssaa Brigade reference the real and perceived sense of status, power, empowerment, dignity, and self-fulfillment attained through their employment in the brigade. These women desire to do more than merely sit at home awaiting their ISIS fighter husbands to return from their most recent battles; they joined the brigade because it represented "a chance to do more than just subsist, and it paralleled their husbands' work."¹⁷⁷ One ISIS defector pointedly stated that she had not heeded her mother's warnings before joining the brigade and was, instead, "seduced by the sense of power,...[a newfound] 'authority in the streets.'"¹⁷⁸ Another al-Khanssaa defector stated, "For me, it was about power and money, mostly power...I just had more authority."¹⁷⁹ It must be noted that these remarks come from some of ISIS's Muslim, Arab female defectors; these are women who were born and raised in the local environment, exposed to the social and cultural norms of a patriarchal society. In contrast to some assessments that the ranks of the al-Khanssaa Brigade are filled by unmarried Western women only, these accounts reflect that both female *ansar* and *muhajirat* possess the propensity for violence.

¹⁷⁶ Consult Almohammad and Speckhard's "The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female ISIS Operatives: From Assassins and Morality Police to Spies and Suicide Bombers," International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 23 April 2017, <http://www.icsve.org/research-reports/the-operational-ranks-and-roles-of-female-isis-operatives-from-assassins-and-morality-police-to-spies-and-suicide-bombers/> for additional information concerning the roles filled by women within ISIS.

¹⁷⁷ Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers" *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html?_r=0.

¹⁷⁸ Damon and Tuysuz, "How She Went from a Schoolteacher to an ISIS Member," CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/06/world/meast/isis-female-fighter/>.

¹⁷⁹ Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers," *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html?_r=0.

Beyond the increased freedom of movement that naturally comes with being a member of the brigade, employment as an enforcer has tangible benefits, including a monthly stipend ranging between \$150USD and \$250USD, additional food rations, weapons training, and religious education.¹⁸⁰ While the preponderance of *ansar* women who have sworn their allegiance to ISIS did so apparently recognizing that it represents the lesser of two evils, when many lack the means to feed and protect their families and themselves; these statements reflect not only agency in the decision-making process but also a desire to improve one's status within society. Aligning with ISIS and taking on roles within its morality police provided these women with a means to earn a salary, gain increased freedom of movement, and attain a sense of dignity and self-fulfillment. In establishing all-female units and opening up increased participation for women, ISIS has unwittingly empowered its female members to increase their roles within both the organization and the society/state it is creating. This analysis is echoed by Thomas Hegghammer, an expert on Islamist militancy affiliated with the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment, who states that the mere presence of these all-female brigades and their accompanying roles and responsibilities are "indicative of a bigger, slow-moving shift toward allowing women 'more operative' roles in the jihadi movement. 'There is a process of female emancipation taking place in the jihadi movement.'"¹⁸¹

3. Planners, Combatants, and Suicide Bombers

While its leadership maintains that women's primary role within the organization remains within the domestic sphere, there is no religious preclusion to women taking a more active role as jihadis and martyrs in support of ISIS's defensive *jihad*. Recognizing *jihad* as a religious obligation, a significant number of ISIS's online female supporters have publicized their willingness and desire to participate as jihadis in more traditional

¹⁸⁰ Damon and Gul Tuysuz, "How She Went from a Schoolteacher to an ISIS Member," CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/06/world/middleeast/isis-female-fighter/>; Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers," *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html?_r=0; Winsor, "ISIS Is Actively Recruiting Female Fighters," *Business Insider*, <http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-has-female-battalions-too-2014-10>; and Veatch, "Women of ISIS: The Role of the Oppressed in Oppressing," *Foreign Policy Journal*, <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2014/12/12/women-of-isis-the-role-of-the-oppressed-in-oppressing/>.

¹⁸¹ Gilsinan, "The ISIS Crackdown on Women," *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/the-women-of-isis/375047/>.

combat operations. A plethora of online posts indicates the propensity of ISIS women to endorse and advocate for increasing levels of violence against their enemies, a long list that includes fellow Muslims and Arabs, as well as non-Muslims. In response, women and men outside of ISIS's territorial control in Iraq and Syria have begun carrying out lone-wolf and coordinated attacks in ISIS's name. Many of these attacks have been claimed by ISIS, with subsequent evidence verifying that the perpetrators had sworn their allegiance to the organization in advance.

Historically, women rarely carry out lone wolf attacks in the name of jihadist organizations. However, since the announcement of the reestablishment of the Islamic Caliphate in 2014, attacks have been planned and executed in Europe, Africa, and North America by individuals and cells, many of which included women who have pledged their allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Serving as the only example of a successful female martyrdom operation in the name of ISIS, Diana Ramazova carried out a suicide bombing at a police station in Istanbul in January 2015. While ISIS has yet to claim the attack, which killed one police officer and wounded another, information released by Turkish authorities highlights the Russian national's affiliation with the organization and raises questions regarding her ability to execute such an attack in the absence of organizational funding, training, and support.¹⁸² Subsequent attacks and additional reporting indicate that Ramazova is not an anomaly. Hayat Boumeddiene became one of France's "Most Wanted" criminals when she was suspected as an accomplice of Amedy Coulibaly, her common-law husband, who killed a police officer prior to attacking a kosher supermarket

¹⁸² Toygun Atilla, "Suicide Bomber Who Attacked Istanbul Police Was Married to Norwegian ISIL Jihadist," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 16 January 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/suicide-bomber-who-attacked-istanbul-police-was-married-to-norwegian-isil-jihadist.aspx?PageID=238&NID=77070&NewsCatID=509>; Catherine Phillips, "Female Istanbul Suicide Bomber Identified as Russian Citizen," *Newsweek*, 08 January 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/female-istanbul-suicide-bombed-identified-russian-citizen-297888>; Constanze Letsch, "Pregnant Istanbul Suicide Bomber Was Russian Citizen," *The Guardian*, 16 January 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/16/pregnant-istanbul-suicide-bomber-russian-citizen>.

two days after the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015.¹⁸³ Boumeddiene, who is believed to have traveled to Syria prior to the attacks, was later interviewed by ISIS's *Dar al Islam* magazine, which claims that she was one of the perpetrators in the series of attacks that gripped Paris in mid-January 2015. Similarly, while her role remains unclear, Hasna Ait Boulahcen's presence during a French police raid in the Paris suburb of Saint-Denis in November 2015 has raised questions regarding the evolving roles of women in ISIS's more traditional combat and martyrdom operations.¹⁸⁴ During the police siege of a suspected ISIS cell, Ait Boulahcen is described as having repeatedly cried out for help in an alleged attempt to draw police officers in before one of her co-conspirators detonated an explosive vest. Additionally, authorities believe that Ait Boulahcen may have actively engaged in firing an automatic rifle at the police officers conducting the raid. Initial statements from French authorities indicating that Ait Boulahcen had detonated a suicide vest that she was wearing subsequently raised questions as to whether or not ISIS had adopted this tactic, which has previously been used by other jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda and HAMAS. Whatever her role, according to Lorenzo Vidinoa, Director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University's Center for Cyber and Homeland Security, "she was active, she was known to intelligence as part of the milieu [of ISIS plotters], she was a cousin [of Abaaoud], she was plugged in."¹⁸⁵ While the extent of Ait Boulahcen's role as an ISIS combatant remains unclear, an article published by *The New York Times* in October 2016 highlights the increasingly active role that French women are taking in planning and executing attacks on behalf of and/or in support

¹⁸³ Sam Adams, "Hayat Boumeddiene: Paris Attack Terrorist's Widow Tells Islamic State Magazine He Was 'Burning with Desire' for Jihad," *Mirror*, 17 February 2015, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/hayat-boumeddiene-paris-attack-terrorists-5153094>; Paul Cruickshank, "ISIS Magazine Claims Hayat Boumeddiene is in Syria," CNN, 12 February 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/11/europe/isis-boumeddiene-magazine/>; Kim Willsher, "Islamic State Magazine Interviews Hayat Boumeddiene," *The Guardian*, 12 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/12/islamic-state-magazine-interviews-hayat-boumeddiene>; and "ISIS Releases Interview with Terror Widow Hayat Boumeddiene," *Daily News*, 12 February 2015, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/isis-releases-interview-hayat-boumeddiene-article-1.2112712>.

¹⁸⁴ Tiffany Ap, "What ISIS Wants from Women," CNN, 20 November 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/20/europe/isis-role-of-women/> and Josh Meyer, "Will ISIS Use Female Suicide Bombers?," NBC News, 20 November 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/paris-terror-attacks/will-there-be-more-female-suicide-bombers-n466971>.

¹⁸⁵ Meyer, "Will ISIS Use Female Suicide Bombers?," NBC News, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/paris-terror-attacks/will-there-be-more-female-suicide-bombers-n466971>.

of ISIS. “There was the parked car stuffed with gas canisters near the Notre Dame Cathedral, a possible effort to set off an explosion in the heart of Paris. There was the suspected plot to attack a train station in the Paris area. There was the effort by one of the Islamic State’s most prominent propagandists to recruit two young people.”¹⁸⁶ In all three cases, French women were the perpetrators; a statistic which is no longer that alarming given statements made by Francois Molins, the Paris prosecutor in charge of terrorism investigations nationwide: “‘The terrorist organization [ISIS] not only uses men but also women, young women,’...[who] are often younger and blur traditional gender roles between male and female Islamic extremists. They are more willing to take action themselves rather than to remain behind the scenes.”¹⁸⁷

Subsequent to the series of ISIS-affiliated attacks in France in 2015, ISIS began employing women in direct combat operations in its strongholds in Libya. With a sizable force of capable fighters controlling Wilayat Barqa, an Islamic emirate in eastern Libya, spanning approximately 860km along the Mediterranean coast between Sirte and Derna, the terrorist organization turned its attention to western Libya, where it established training camps in Sabratha. In late-February/early-March 2016, multiple regional and international news outlets reported statements from local officials that represented the first recorded use of women as combatants within ISIS operations.¹⁸⁸ According to Taher al-Gharabli, Head of Sabratha’s Military Council, “Several female operatives have been

¹⁸⁶ Alissa J. Rubin and Aurelien Breeden, “Women’s Emergence as Terrorists in France Points to Shift in ISIS Gender Roles,” *The New York Times*, 01 October 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/europe/womens-emergence-as-terrorists-in-france-points-to-shift-in-isis-gender-roles.html?_r=0. Details concerning the planned attacks against the Notre Dame Cathedral and the Gare de Lyon train station were corroborated by Dalia Ghanem Yazbeck, “Sisters in Arms,” *Diwan*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 24 October 2016, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64929>.

¹⁸⁷ Rubin and Breeden, “Women’s Emergence as Terrorists in France,” *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/europe/womens-emergence-as-terrorists-in-france-points-to-shift-in-isis-gender-roles.html?_r=0.

¹⁸⁸ Bel Trew, “ISIS Sends Women into Battle in Libya,” *The Times*, 29 February 2016, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/isis-sends-women-into-battle-in-libya-rjmhqc7k7>; Muzaffar Salman, “ISIS Using Women in Combat Roles, 3 Dead & 7 Arrested – Libyan Military Leader,” *Russian Times*, 29 February 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/333991-isis-women-arrested-combat/>; Samuel Osborne, “ISIS Starts Using Female Fighters and Suicide Bombers for the First Time,” *The Independent*, 29 February 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/isis-starts-using-female-fighters-and-suicide-bombers-for-the-first-time-a6903166.html>; and “ISIS in Libya Starts Using Female Fighters and Suicide Bombers for the First Time,” *African Free Press*, 02 March 2016, <http://africanfreepress.com/isis-in-libya-starts-using-female-fighters-and-suicide-bombers-for-the-first-time/>.

killed, fighting alongside the men. One of them tried to blow herself up, wearing an explosive vest.”¹⁸⁹ Seven female combatants were taken into custody and at least three were killed during the ISIS attack in the western city of Sabratha, which is over 500km west of ISIS’s stronghold in Sirte. In addition to the 6,000 ISIS fighters believed to be operational in and around the region, “there are now 1,000 women, 300 of them Tunisian, with ISIS in Libya. They have different roles, including fighting,” according to Badra Gaalouol, a women’s researcher at the International Centre of Strategic Security and Military Studies, based in Tunis.¹⁹⁰ The Tunisian Ministry of Women corroborated assessments that Tunisian women are increasingly joining ISIS and its affiliates when it announced that, as of late-May 2016, more than 700 Tunisian women had joined ISIS and other militant groups in Syria and Iraq. With the expansion of the Caliphate onto the African continent, these women no longer have to travel as far in order to pledge their allegiance and take up arms in support of ISIS’s cause. Oulfa Hamrounni is just one Tunisian mother who lost two of her daughters to ISIS in Libya, a location that the organization has touted as “the new frontier of its self-proclaimed caliphate.”¹⁹¹ Subsequent to U.S. airstrikes, a spokesman for the Libyan militia confirmed that both girls were in custody—an update which was likely welcomed by their mother, who believed that one of her daughters, who had received weapons training, was in Sabratha with other extremists planning to launch an attack.¹⁹² Today, she does her best to prevent her younger two daughters from being radicalized like their older sisters.

¹⁸⁹ Trew, “ISIS Sends Women into Battle in Libya,” *The Times*, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/isis-sends-women-into-battle-in-libya-rjmhqc7k7>.

¹⁹⁰ William Watkinson, “Hundreds of ISIS Jihadi Brides Sent for Combat Training in Libya after Promotion from ‘Wifely’ Duties,” *International Business Times*, 19 April 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/hundreds-isis-jihadi-brides-sent-combat-training-libya-after-promotion-wifely-duties-1555691>.

¹⁹¹ Sudarsan Raghavan, “Two of Her Daughters Joined ISIS. Now She’s Trying to Save Her Two Younger Girls,” *The Washington Post*, 25 May 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/two-of-her-daughters-joined-isis-now-shes-trying-to-save-her-two-younger-girls/2016/05/25/700ea478-1d1e-11e6-82c2-a7dcb313287d_story.html?postshare=6041464233135241&tid=ss_mail&utm_term=.28123b0bb941.

¹⁹² Raghavan, “Two of Her Daughters Joined ISIS,” *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/two-of-her-daughters-joined-isis-now-shes-trying-to-save-her-two-younger-girls/2016/05/25/700ea478-1d1e-11e6-82c2-a7dcb313287d_story.html?postshare=6041464233135241&tid=ss_mail&utm_term=.28123b0bb941.

Beyond the aforementioned plans to conduct attacks in Europe, the women of ISIS have served as snipers in Sirte and Mosul; planned a suicide attack during Morocco's 2016 legislative elections—representing the first time Moroccan authorities have uncovered a terrorist cell entirely composed of women; attacked the main police station in Mombasa—later publicly acknowledged by ISIS's news platform *Amaq*; and planned to attack the civilian population in Kuwait in order to undermine the state's security and stability.¹⁹³

D. CONCLUSION

Increasingly, women are taking on roles that have been traditionally reserved for ISIS's male jihadis. In the face of additional territorial losses, a decreasing supply of available male fighters, and mounting threats from other non-state actors and coalition forces, ISIS will increasingly rely on female combatants. However, what appears more interesting is that there are indications that many of these women and young girls, particularly those from Western backgrounds, are taking these more active and more prominent roles upon themselves, rather than waiting for ISIS's leaders to issue an official call-to-arms. According to Farhad Khosrokhavar, a sociologist at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, interviews with young women who had traveled to Syria (or attempted to do so) highlight the fact that many of these newer female recruits are much more independent than their predecessors: "These are young women who have grown up in Europe, where it is taken for granted that women can control much about their lives. The result is that their language is that of European

¹⁹³ Rubin and Breeden, "Women's Emergence as Terrorists in France," *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/europe/womens-emergence-as-terrorists-in-france-points-to-shift-in-isis-gender-roles.html?_r=0; Yazbeck, "Sisters in Arms," *Diwan*, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64929>; Jason Burke, "ISIS Sends Female Supporter to Serve as Frontline Suicide Bombers," *The Guardian*, 12 November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/12/isis-women-frontline-suicide-bombers>; "ISIS' Female Fighters on the Battlefield," Consortium Against Terrorist Finance, 14 September 2016, <http://stopterrorfinance.org/stories/511010153-isis-female-fighters-on-the-battlefront>; Mohamed Mostafa, "IS Deploys Women Snipers, Fights Harder in Remaining Western Mosul Districts," *Iraqi News*, 03 April 2017, <http://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/deploys-women-snipers-fights-harder-remaining-western-mosul-districts/>; and "ISIS Using All-Female Sniper Death Squad in Battle for Mosul," *The Baghdad Post*, 29 April 2017, <http://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/story/9932/ISIS-using-all-female-sniper-death-squad-in-battle-for-Mosul>.

feminists and, yet, confusingly, was in the service of an ideology quite contrary to that.”¹⁹⁴

Recognizing the distinct tactical and strategic advantages gained through the utilization of women in more combatant roles, ISIS’s leaders may continue to incorporate female jihadis into its terrorist operations both inside and outside of its self-proclaimed caliphate. However, whether or not al-Baghdadi and ISIS’s religious clerics issue an official call-to-arms seems to matter little; the women who are attracted to ISIS, whether they come from Syria or the United States of America, seem ready to create a space for themselves within the organization, the state it is creating, and the *jihad* it is waging.

¹⁹⁴ Rubin and Breeden, “Women’s Emergence as Terrorists in France,” *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/europe/womens-emergence-as-terrorists-in-france-points-to-shift-in-isis-gender-roles.html?_r=0.

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V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. INTRODUCTION

This comparative study of the Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS), al-Qaeda (AQ), and the Islamic State (ISIS) demonstrated that women serve in more active and combatant roles, beyond those of wives, mothers, and sacrificial lambs, and that differing roles are essential to these Islamist extremist organizations (IEO). As recruiters, propagandists, logisticians, spies, enforcers, trainers, fighters, suicide bombers, planners, and leaders, women are taking on increasingly public roles that are crucial to these organizations achieving their stated nationalist, global jihadist, and state-building aims. While men may numerically dominate these groups, the roles that women fill are of no less significance in terms of strategic and tactical advantages, media attention, operational success, recruitment, fundraising, logistical support and coordination, and network connectivity. In fact, women's participation often increases the organizations' access during heightened security, expands the pool of potential recruits, and enhances the psychological impact of the operations executed.

Beyond hapless victims and innocent bystanders, women serve as strategic and tactical actors within these IEOs. Furthermore, as highlighted by a recent Brookings Institution editorial piece, "the majority of women who support, join, or are recruited to these groups are actually moderately to well-educated women, [who] are making choices... they see it as a form of empowerment, liberation, and an opportunity to live in a society with a belief system that they subscribe to."¹⁹⁵ In short, women do not lack agency; their participation within IEOs, often directly supporting and sometimes even carrying out violent acts, is a choice that is made freely. How far women can take their participation remains to be seen. Will organizational ideologies adapt and evolve as women progress, altering the external patriarchal attitudes? Given the trend of women's participation in HAMAS over the past 30 years as well as their evolving roles within AQ

¹⁹⁵ Beverly Milton-Edwards and Sumaya Attia, "Female Terrorists and Their Role in Jihadi Groups," Brookings Institution, 09 May 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/female-terrorists-and-their-role-in-jihadi-groups/>.

and ISIS more recently, the emergence of women as leaders within IEOs may not be too far off.

It is difficult to identify the specific motivations and causal factors that lead to radicalization and eventual operationalization for any terrorist. Despite this fact, analysis of women's participation within HAMAS, AQ, and ISIS illustrates that not only do motivations vary from individual to individual and are generally a composite of personal, religious, and ideological factors, but also that the factors that motivate women are similar to those of their male counterparts. Like the men within these organizations who pick up rifles and don explosive vests, women too are pushed and pulled by various factors. Revenge, a sense of adventure, religious and ideological beliefs, coercion, cooption, etc., can serve as forces that drive one towards radicalization. In all cases, the individuals are still making the choice to ultimately align themselves to a terrorist organization that is carrying out acts of heinous violence against innocent individuals. This thesis highlights that, while the motivations are not different, the way society views, reacts to, and treats those women who participate in terrorism differs greatly in comparison to their male counterparts. In doing so, we deny these women their agency and undermine the contributions that women are making to these organizations and the acts of terror that they perpetrate.

Furthermore, women are no less likely to possess an inherent propensity for violence. According to Chatterjee, "human proneness to violence...seems rather situational and reactionary and can be applicable irrespective of sexual differences."¹⁹⁶ Some argue that, when presented with the opportunity, women are often as violent as, if not more violent than, their male associates. Consider a *Middle East Quarterly* report that concludes, "Female hands-on killers and conspirator-accomplices are, like their male counterparts, often calculating, brutal, and without remorse."¹⁹⁷ Anecdotal reporting about a female AQ member who was systematically arranging the raping of Iraqi women in order to coerce them into becoming suicide bombers and the various reports of the

¹⁹⁶ Debangana Chatterjee, "Gendering ISIS and Mapping the Role of Women," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3, no. 2 (2016): 205.

¹⁹⁷ Phyllis Chesler, "When Women Commit Honor Killings," *Middle East Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 7, <http://www.meforum.org/5477/when-women-commit-honor-killings>.

women of ISIS's al-Khanssaa Brigade implementing sadistic forms of torture under the guise of punishment for breaking the roles of proper dress and behavior demonstrate just how violent women can be.

B. HYPOTHESES EVALUATION

1. H1: Women have become more assertive within Muslim societies and are, in fact, in charge of their own destinies. Their (increased) participation within Islamist extremist organizations is a reflection of advances they have made within Muslim societies.

H1 attempted to evaluate to what extent women's participation within IEOs is a reflection of their increased assertiveness within Muslim societies. This hypothesis argued that Muslim women have already achieved some level of equality/parity within their religion and/or within their societies and, as such, play an equal role in political activism and IEOs. Reflecting on the growing Islamic Feminist ideology that emphasizes a return to Qu'anic teachings that acknowledge the natural equality between men and women, it becomes clear that women's increasing participation within IEOs and associated evolving roles in these organizations can be explained, in part, by the fact that Muslim women are becoming more assertive within their societies, particularly in terms of political and social activism based upon specific interpretations of religious texts, prophetic traditions, and Islamic jurisprudence. Based upon the belief that God has not only endowed them with equal rights but also that it is their moral and religious obligation to participate in *jihad* in defense of their faith and those who practice it, women have increasingly sought out and created additional space for their participation within these movements. In all three organizations, there are examples of women creating additional space for themselves within the organization and taking their destinies into their own hands.

Women's participation within HAMAS, both as an IEO and a political movement, best reflects this potential reason for why women's roles have evolved over the course of the past thirty years. The women of HAMAS have drawn upon the precedent for female engagement established by women during the early days of the nationalist endeavor of the Palestinian people, religious texts, and the organizations' charter to exert their

influence on the organization and demand institutional and organizational change that affords them expanded roles within both the political and militant wings. The nationalist nature of the movement provides an opening for the participation of women. Similarly, like HAMAS's nationalist agenda, ISIS espouses a state-building agenda that affords the opportunity for women to assert greater roles within the organization. Women are necessary to legitimize the creation and development of the state. Since ISIS's main goal is the reestablishment of the Islamic Caliphate in the Levant, it needs women to do so. As such, women recognize that they have essential roles to fill within ISIS and the formation of a renewed Islamic Caliphate, and they leverage this necessity to assert their desires for expanded roles, despite the organization's misogynistic interpretations of the *Qu'ran* that have contributed to extremely restrictive laws concerning women's dress and behavior.

Alternatively, the growing numbers of foreign fighters drawn to both AQ and ISIS from Western cultures reflect the fact that Muslim women, accustomed to a certain level of equality/parity within their religion and/or within their societies, are taking matters into their own hands, ignoring the pleas of their parents and spouses, occasionally abandoning husbands and children, and traveling thousands of miles unaccompanied in order to join a cause that promises to establish a utopian Islamic society. As for those women who do not travel overseas but take up roles as supporters, facilitators, logisticians, planners, or lone wolf actors in their home countries, their participation in support of and within these IEOs reflects a certain level of autonomy with regard to freedom of thought, freedom of movement, and freedom of expression within the public sphere that has previously been considered subordinated to the patriarchal hierarchies that persist within Muslim immigrant families, neighborhoods, and congregations in the West.

While this hypothesis is not all-encompassing, it partially explains why the roles women fill within IEOs have evolved to include increased participation within the public sphere, including serving as combatants. Notably, this hypothesis is less likely to explain the increased participation and evolving roles of non-Western women's participation in global jihadist organizations, particularly AQ and to a lesser extent ISIS. This hypothesis is partly verified, for some women.

2. H2: Women are strategically recruited and operationalized in order to achieve particular organizational objectives (whether societal, ideological, or combatant).

H2 assumed that women serve a strategic purpose for IEOs. In their endeavors to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of multiple variables, leaders are increasingly seeking out female participation within extremist organizations in order to achieve specific objectives. All three case studies demonstrate the strategic and tactical advantages that women afford IEOs. Whether increasing access to persons and/or facilities in the face of increased and/or enhanced security measures, generating additional support, expanding the pool of available recruits, contributing to the organization's propaganda and media campaigns, or serving as central nodes that enhance organizational durability and survivability, women present IEOs with distinct advantages in comparison to rival forces and/or competitors. As such, all three groups have adapted their interpretations of religious texts, prophetic traditions, and Islamic jurisprudence in order to accommodate the incorporation and operationalization of women. As these organizations encounter greater resistance and threats from domestic, foreign, and coalition forces; as they suffer increasing casualties; and as they lose conquered territories and/or local, regional, global support; the propensity that their operational and religious leaders will open up additional space for female participation greatly increases. This hypothesis explains why IEOs have opened up space for women to participate within their organizations and fill increasingly combatant roles in support of their espoused agendas, and it provides circumstances that might contribute to women adopting more combatant roles within these organizations in the future. However, it does not explain why women have actively joined these organizations or why the world has witnessed unprecedented numbers of women aligning themselves to global jihadist organizations, such as ISIS, at such an alarming rate. Overall, this hypothesis is verified.

3. H3: Women are seeking increased equality and legitimacy within society; they view participation in political activism and increased involvement in Islamist extremist organizations as a means by which to achieve these ends.

In contrast to H1, this hypothesis asserted that Muslim women have not achieved religious and/or social equality/parity with their male counterparts and, as such, seek such

equality through seemingly expanded roles and responsibilities via participation in political activism and IEOs. While this hypothesis does not explain why IEOs would open up space for increased women's participation, it does provide a strong argument as to why an increasing number of women are actively aligning themselves with these terrorist organizations. Whether from Eastern or Western cultures, women within Muslim societies generally encounter predominantly patriarchal hierarchies within their families, mosques, cultures, and local neighborhoods. For those women who have been exposed to the more liberal Western ideologies that emphasize equality and freedom, the desire to achieve parity with their male and non-Muslim counterparts and secure a sense of dignity and empowerment is a strong motivating factor for their participation within IEOs. An often cited motivation for European women who have pledged their allegiance to ISIS and traveled to live in its self-proclaimed caliphate is the fact that government policies within their home countries have denied them their right to practice their faith as they choose, i.e., prohibitions on veils and *niqabs*. In joining ISIS, they seek to live within the idealized Islamic state that has been espoused, one in which they are free to practice their faith without prohibition on outward expressions of that faith. However, the absence of exposure to Western society does not mean that women from Eastern cultures do not seek similar desires. In fact, as indicated in Chapter IV, a number of the Syrian women who joined ISIS's al-Khanssaa Brigade did so out of a desire to improve their status, gain a sense of empowerment, and fulfill a desire for self-worth and dignity. This hypothesis is verified for some women.

4. H4: Religiously and culturally conservative Islamist extremist organizations have become more reflective of leftist, nationalist organizations in their stated objectives; as such, like in other national movements, increasing female participation and expansion of roles/responsibilities is a natural progression along the spectrum of political activism.

This hypothesis suggested that IEOs tend to possess ideologies and objectives that reflect those of traditional leftist, national movements. As such, the participation of women is an inherent function along the spectrum of political activity. While this hypothesis seems to provide little explanation for the participation and evolving roles of women within AQ, it does provide a strong argument for the expanding roles of women

within both HAMAS and ISIS. As previously mentioned, HAMAS is an ethno-religious nationalist movement in which “Muslim women have a no lesser role than men in the war of liberation.”¹⁹⁸ From its establishment, HAMAS has recognized that women have a role to play in the creation of a Palestinian state. The fact that HAMAS has evolved into a duly elected governing authority further contributes to the efficacy of this hypothesis in terms of women’s participation within the movement. From political activists to suicide bombers to elected officials, the participation of women within HAMAS illustrates the expansion of roles and responsibilities as a natural progression along the spectrum of political activism. Comparatively, while it is too early to conclude the extent to which women will fill political and leadership roles in ISIS, the fact that the organization espouses a state-building agenda indicates that there is inherently a role for women within this organization. As previously mentioned, women are fundamental to the legitimacy of ISIS and, as such, serve a purpose that warrants the time, energy, and resources that the organization is expending to recruit them to its cause. Currently, the women of ISIS serve not only as jihadi brides and mothers, but they also fill essential roles as recruiters, as enforcers of the organization’s strict code of Islamic laws regarding dress and behavior, and even as operators. There is the potential that the roles women fill within ISIS could expand to include greater responsibility as well as a more combatant nature should the organization gain or lose a large segment of its currently held territories, experience a drastic decline in available male recruits, and/or achieve greater legitimacy. This hypothesis cannot be verified or disproved.

C. IMPLICATIONS AND FOLLOW-ON RESEARCH

Representing nearly half of the world’s population, women serve as a significant pool from which to recruit, train, and operationalize future terrorists. Recognizing that women present strategic and tactical advantages to extremist organizations, if current counter-terrorism efforts are to prove successful, there must be an increased focus on the expanding roles that women play within violent extremist organizations (VEO). No longer do women seem content to fill logistical and support roles; they have increasingly

¹⁹⁸ “The Charter of Allah,” FAS.org, <https://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/880818.htm>.

sought out and obtained more active, combatant roles. Codifying the factors that contribute to and characterize women's involvement in terrorism is a necessary field of research. Such information, and analysis thereof, is essential to providing a broader understanding of terrorism as well as to formulating potential initiatives focused on prevention and intervention.¹⁹⁹ Whether as recruiters, trainers, fighters, planners, or suicide bombers, the increasingly participatory and more active roles of women within IEOs, such as AQ, HAMAS, and ISIS, is bringing them onto the frontlines of battle. A natural corollary of their expanding roles within the public sphere is that increased female participation is drastically altering the traditional norms that have prohibited interaction between unrelated men and women. Furthermore, whether women are demanding greater roles or are being leveraged by the organizations as a result of tactical and strategic benefits matters little, because the result is the same: the role of women within these IEOs has evolved to include increased participation, and this increased participation is naturally impacting the organizations and how they function.

Unfortunately, neither academics, militaries, policy-makers, nor security and intelligence specialists possess the ability to predict what the future holds in terms of whether or not these organizations will continue to utilize women and/or what roles women will seek out for themselves. Regardless of this, the opening of the operational environment to women will undoubtedly have a lasting impact, in terms of both counter-terrorism operations as well as these organizations' understanding of and relationship with female terrorists. If prevention, intervention, counter-terrorism, deradicalization, and reintegration programs and policies continue to adopt gendered terminology and biases, we fail to recognize that women have the capacity and will to act of their own accord. "If we want our culture to recognize women's capacity for leadership and competition, it is hypocritical to deny or downplay women's capacity for aggression and even evil."²⁰⁰ Furthermore, in continuing to treat women terrorists as anomalies, rather than the perpetrators of terror that they are, we put ourselves at additional risk of suffering the

¹⁹⁹ Jacques and Taylor, "Female Terrorism," 499.

²⁰⁰ Cathy Young, "The Surprising Truth about Women and Violence, *TIME*, 25 June 2014, <http://time.com/2921491/hope-solo-women-violence/>.

consequences of actions carried out by these women who afford these organizations tactical and strategic advantages as a result of our biases and pre-conceived notions regarding gender. A woman who chooses to serve as a human shield in defense of jihadist fighters, a woman who emplaces a bomb within a grocery store refrigerator, and a woman who facilitates the movement of funds and materiel necessary to carry out an attack are all complicit in actions supporting terrorist organizations and their associated operations. To label these women as merely victims, logisticians, and passive facilitators belittles their contributions to these organizations and denies their agency as active participants within terrorist operations.

It must be noted that current research is lacking in terms of quantity and quality. In the absence of access to primary sources and/or terrorists themselves, academics, militaries, security and intelligence specialists, and policy-makers are forced to rely on secondary sources for information concerning these organizations, the people who align themselves to them, the operations they carry out, and their intentions for the future. Efforts to procure unbiased reporting and primary data should be increased in order to better analyze these organizations. With regard to the focus of this thesis, research concerning the gender biases within counter-terrorism, prevention, intervention, deradicalization, and reintegration policies and programs will help to better focus efforts that are essential to ensuring our national security and that of our partner nations. Furthermore, additional research is required to better assess the motivations, radicalization processes, and roles of women within IEOs. Potential case studies should include Lebanese Hezbollah, Boko Haram, and Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen. Beyond the roles of women within IEOs, research should also focus on the recruitment, mobilization, and operationalization of children within these organizations.

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